BERSERK
OF GLUTTONY
NOVEL
IV
Written by
Isshiki Ichika
Illustrated by fame

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"Thank you for everything, Fate. Being together with you was the first time in so, so long that...I could just have fun."
"Myne...don't go... Don't go!"

"Why? Brother, why would you do this...?"
She received no response but for the wet sound of sucking. I moved closer, and as crimson liquid rippled out from my footsteps, I came across the tragic sight I'd anticipated.
Rafale was drinking the blood from Memil's neck.

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WRITTEN BY

ISSHIKI ICHIKA

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FAME

Seven Seas Entertainment

BOSHOKU NO BERUSERUKU
-OREDAKE LEVEL TO IU GAINEN WO TOPPA SURU - VOL. 4

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Illustrations by fame

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Chapter 1:
The Fourth Level

A LITTLE OVER TWO MONTHS had passed since I defeated the Divine Dragon in the wastelands of Galia. The continent was now wrapped in the chill of winter, the beginning of spring yet a distant hope.

I trudged on through a world covered in white, my path piled high with snow too thick for any horse and carriage to pass through. In other seasons, the fields around me would be filled with grapes. Now they were hidden under the falling snow.

I had last visited this estate quite some time ago, while serving under Lady Roxy. We'd harvested autumn grapes. The snow was so heavy that I couldn't even tell which field we had worked in. The lands of the Hart family estate were blanketed by unyielding winter.

I walked on, past the lights of shuttered houses lining the snowy paths, until I arrived at the entrance of a mansion. I remembered the mansion of the Hart estate well, but in truth, I'd expected to never see it again. I took a deep breath, then lifted my left hand and knocked on the imposing front doors.

There was no reply.

Worry filled my heart. I tried the door and found it unlocked, so I pushed it open and entered. Inside, the servants hurried back and forth through the foyer, anxious and disorganized. This panic was so unlike their usual conduct that it immediately confirmed my fears: the situation was indeed dire. Still, I was a stranger here, and I'd entered uninvited.

A nearby maid called out to me. I turned toward her and she gasped, unable to hide her astonishment.

"You're…you're Fate, aren't you?" she said. Her name was Maya. We'd met before. "You came here with Roxy during the grape harvest. You're Fate Graphite. But…"

She realized that I had returned from Galia alone, and her face creased with fear.

"Don't worry, Lady Roxy Hart is safe," I said to put her worries at ease. "Once she's completed her duties in Galia, I expect she'll return home herself."

Maya's face flooded with relief, but it lasted only a moment, replaced by confusion. I could see her next thought clearly through her furrowed brows: *Then why are you here, not accompanying Lady Roxy?* That was a worthwhile question. In answer, I showed her the crest I kept hidden under my cloak.

"What *is* this?" Maya asked.

"It's exactly what it looks like. Now, please, may I see Lady Aisha Hart?"

“But that’s…” Maya’s eyes widened in recognition. The sight of the crest had left her struggling for words. But I didn’t need her to fill me in. I’d seen her distress as well as that of the rest of the servants. I understood the gravity of the situation.

“She’s not doing well, is she?” I asked.

“No, she’s not. Her condition has only worsened since last night. The doctor says that she…doesn’t have long…”

“I see.”

“We’re trying to prepare a horse and rider to inform Lady Roxy, but…”

Outside, the winter storm was whipping into a blizzard. Sending a rider into that mess would be far too dangerous. From the dispirited look on Maya’s face, she was thinking the same thing.

I offered a few words of encouragement. “It’s okay, Maya. This is why I’m here. I made a promise to Lady Aisha.” A long time had passed since I made that promise, but at long last, I’d returned.

“A promise?”

“Yes. It’s important.”

Maya led me to Lady Aisha’s room in silence, overwhelmed by my confidence and the meaning of the crest I now wore. More servants stopped and stared as we passed, but there was no time to explain.

Maya and I entered Lady Aisha’s room, where she lay sunken and exhausted on her four-poster bed. Even from a distance, I could tell that her condition was critical. She was surrounded by a group of servants and an old man who must have been her doctor. They looked up at us, disturbed by my sudden intrusion.

Now was the time to introduce myself. “I apologize for barging in. I am Fate Barbatos, heir and head of the Barbatos family. This honor was bestowed upon me by the Blessed Blade—the Blade of Light himself, Lord Aaron Barbatos. Please, I ask you all to make room while I tend to Lady Aisha’s illness.”

From my cloak I produced the Barbatos family crest again, and, showing it around, I slowly made my way past the speechless servants to Lady Aisha’s bed.

“Tend to her illness?!” the elderly doctor cried from her bedside. “Are you mad?! I have exhausted every known means to treat her, but they’re all…they’re useless…”

The doctor’s head drooped, overcome with dismay. I placed my hand gently on his shoulder.

“There is a way,” I said. “Look here at my left arm.”

“What does your arm have to do with this?!”

“Two months ago, my left arm was severed from my body. The power I’m about to wield returned that stump to the healthy limb you see now.”

“Preposterous,” the doctor sputtered. “Total nonsense. You can’t expect us to believe that.”

Of course the doctor would be suspicious and distrustful of a stranger who showed up in the night claiming to have regrown an arm. No one was more aware of the limitations of the human body than a physician. However, I wouldn't let the old man stand in my way.

Just as I stepped forward to push past him, Lady Aisha's eyes opened. Her gaze was distant, but she found me. "Fate…is that you? Oh, you came… I'm so happy to see you…"

"As I promised," I said.

"Then will you…will you tell me…your answer?"

"Before I do, would you allow me to cast a spell for you? Think of it as a prayer. One that will help you feel better."

"Fate, I… Very well. But when you are done, please…tell me your answer."

"Of course, Lady Aisha."

Now that I had her permission, the doctor wouldn't dare stop me. I replaced the crest and withdrew an elegant black stave from my cloak. This stave was the Weapon of Mortal Sin, Greed, in his Fourth Level form. I could now fully wield its power thanks to the twin guidance of my two mentors—the demon Myne and the monster Eris. I had been pushed past my limits by their grueling training regimen.

In other words, those were painful memories I wished to forget. Those two had made training with the former holy knight, Aaron, the Blade of Light, look like a walk in the park.

"Greed," I said. "Are you ready?"

"I'm always ready," the stave retorted. "Just in case you've forgotten! You know you gotta pony up 40 percent of your stats to me, right?"

"You're cutting me a good deal."

Greed cackled. "Then let me at 'em!"

I felt my stats drain out through my arm as the stave expanded into its Apocalyptic form. Its intricate design reshaped itself into ominous angles. The servants drew back, quivering in fear. As Maya covered her head and dropped to the ground with a frightened cry, I cast Greed's Fourth Level secret technique, Twilight Healing.

For the most part, healing magic was unknown to us humans—with the exception of Twilight Healing. In order to cast this unique spell, I had to sacrifice 40 percent of my stats while I was in the Domain of E. This spell could heal any injury or sickness. As far as I knew, its only limitation was that it could not restore the dead to life. If physical damage was especially bad, more stats had to be offered to the spell, but with enough stats to offer…the stave's healing potential was effectively limitless.

This spell alone had the power to save the lives of the people I cared about.

A crimson seal inscribed itself into the air above Lady Aisha's chest. White flame sparked from its central healing flame. Illuminating the

woman’s prone form, the white flame began its work. Little by little, color returned to Lady Aisha’s pallid face.

The servants murmured among themselves as Lady Aisha's condition improved before their eyes. As the spell faded, it became clear that Lady Aisha had completely recovered. Gently, she touched her face and arms as if examining herself for proof of the miracle that had just unfolded. Finally, she turned to me with a smile.

"I'm glad I kept fighting my illness for as long as I did," she said. "Otherwise, I never would've seen this wondrous spell."

"I'm glad, too, Lady Aisha."

We shared a smile before Lady Aisha spoke again. "Are you ready to tell me your answer now?"

"*You* are essential to Lady Roxy," I said. "You're her last direct relative, and I believe that you should watch over her. That is why I returned to you. But I'm no longer the Fate Graphite you met when I last visited. I am now Fate Barbatos, the heir of the Barbatos family."

Lady Aisha looked thoughtful, but she said nothing in reply. In her silence, I bid her and the others farewell.

Just as I was leaving the room, Lady Aisha spoke once more. "Does Roxy know about this?"

"She doesn't."

"I see."

As I closed the bedroom door behind me, I could hear Lady Aisha speaking excitedly. "Roxy will be so very amazed to learn of my recovery! As soon as we're able, we *must* make arrangements to visit her in the capital!"

Travel plans already? I couldn't help but wonder if I'd given her a little too much energy when I healed her. It was with this fleeting worry that I put the Hart estate behind me.

I returned along the snowy paths I had walked earlier, following them up to the great tree at the top of a hill where my companion waited for me: a warrior with a head of hair as white as the snow. Upon her slight frame, this girl carried a gargantuan black axe. She watched, her face expressionless, as I arrived at the base of the tree.

"Are you done?" she asked.

"Yes. We were right to hurry, Myne. A little longer and we might have been too late."

"Hm. Good news. Well, let's go."

Myne and I walked together through the storm, along the wintry paths, headed back for the Kingdom of Seifort. By now, Eris should have arrived ahead of us. There was no telling what would happen if we kept her waiting too long. Yet even while I dreaded our reunion with Eris, I felt excitement. I couldn't wait to visit my old tavern. I was looking forward to ordering some of that expensive wine the barkeep had told me about before I left.

Chapter 2:
The Snowy Paths of Memory

ON OUR WAY to the kingdom, the snowstorm worsened, and we took shelter in a cave to escape the freezing cold. The opening to the cave was easily big enough for five people, and though I worried that it might be home to a beast or monster, Myne assured me that she sensed nothing. I ventured inside with my black sword clasped in hand and discovered the remains of a campfire, as well as a stockpile of firewood against the walls.

"Myne, look. We can use this to start a fire."

"I suppose it is getting a little cold."

Perhaps another traveler had used this cave as a camping ground, maybe for a hunting expedition. Whatever the case, we were both grateful for the supplies they'd left behind. I arranged some firewood to start a campfire of our own. It was good, dry wood, and I was sure it would burn well. I used my trusty Fireball spell to light the fire, and once filled with the bright crackle of blazing firewood, the gloom of the cave instantly transformed. The calming dance of the flames bathed us in warm light.

I let out a sigh, relieved. "It's so toasty."

"There's nothing like a campfire in winter."

We set our weapons against the wall, and I unrolled my travel blanket on the floor by the fire. Not long after I sat down, Myne sat beside me and pushed into my side, as if to snuggle.

"Myne, how about giving me a little space? There's enough room around the fire for both of us."

She didn't budge. "This is the best way to get warm. Also, the best way to keep warm."

"Wait, don't tell me…you don't like the cold?"

"I'm…not a wimp, Fate."

Still, Myne pushed closer. It made me smile. This young woman never hesitated when it came to getting her way. And it really was much warmer with her close. I had no real reason to complain.

I let my thoughts wander as I stared at the campfire. Then I peeked over at Myne.

"What is it, Fate?" The girl was nothing if not a true warrior. She felt my gaze immediately.

"I was just thinking…about how much you've helped me. There was that time after the battle with the Divine Dragon, of course, but you've been at my side countless other times too."

"That's because you're still weak," Myne said with her typical bluntness. "Without me, you'd be dead."

"Well…yeah, compared to you, I'm not that strong, but I'm doing my best to get there."

Myne nodded in agreement, a gesture that felt decidedly rare for her. "Yes, Fate," she murmured. "You really…you really are trying your best."

I was filled with joy. *She praised me!*

Then, in the very next instant, Myne dropped into slumber.

Though it sometimes felt like she used me more like a favorite pillow than a friend, her slumber was so blissful that I was happy to let this incident slide. I turned my gaze back to the flickering flames of the campfire, at which point my thoughts drifted back to the events that had transpired not long after I parted ways with Lady Roxy in Galia.

***

So how had I ended up in a one-armed predicament? I'd lost my left arm in battle. In order to get it back, Myne and Eris had seen fit to put me through special training.

After I had defeated the Divine Dragon, I'd sacrificed the entirety of my stats to Greed in order to unlock his Fourth Level, the black stave. Myne and Eris had then decided to train me in the ways of the stave, teaching me to wield its secret technique, Twilight Healing.

Myne and Eris were both apparently well versed in the workings of this Fourth Level secret technique. They said Twilight Healing was even capable of restoring the arm I'd lost. To say I couldn't believe this bold claim would have been an understatement. It was one thing to talk about healing major injuries, but restoring an entire severed limb? That was a bridge too far for me, and I told them so. Myne decided the quickest course of action was to beat the information into me. Literally.

Later, as I tended my bruises, I asked Greed about it. His reply was as arrogant as I expected.

"It's no lie, Fate. But having said that, my Fourth Level secret technique is a hell of a thing to master. Remember the Third Level secret technique you unleashed in the battle against the Divine Dragon? This is on a far higher level than even that. For starters, it requires 40 percent of your total stats. And until you heighten your mastery of Bloody Ptarmigan, the First Level secret technique, you can forget about getting started on the Fourth. Oh, and you better get used to hanging out in the Domain of E too. That's another prerequisite for Twilight Healing!"

"Chin up, Fate," Myne said while I was trying to absorb all this information.

"All right, let's get going," said Eris, equally impatient.

"Get going? Wait, but where to? Guys, wait!" I cried.

But my words fell on two sets of deaf ears, and I was summarily whisked off into the depths of the country of death, Galia. We headed for the far south, to the orc colonies. On our way there, I was told this little jaunt was to earn back all the stats I'd lost by releasing Greed's Fourth Level. In short, it was more like endlessly training until I was a haggard shadow.

"Fate, think of this as an all-you-can-eat buffet!" said Eris. "No shortage of food for you here. And besides, now that you've reached the Domain of E, you'll have much better control over your pesky Gluttony. First off, you'll have to eat all these delicious souls to get your stats back. Then we'll make you fire your Bloody Ptarmigan attack until you can't raise your

arm anymore. But no need to worry. If you get tired, I'll be right here to perk you back up again!" She blew me a kiss.

"I don't need to be perked up!" I protested. "And more importantly, are you serious about making me fire the Bloody Ptarmigan that many times?!"

In my one-armed state, just thinking about that constant energy drain—10 percent of my stats, every shot—had been terrifying. Confusion and doubt had seized me, but in the face of my objections, Eris remained firmly frank and nonchalant.

"We wouldn't lie to you, Fate. Right, Myne?"

"Right," Myne said. "Now aim over there. Fire! Now!"

Myne pointed at a horde of orcs charging toward us from the horizon. There were definitely more than two thousand of them, every last one crazed with rage at the sudden appearance of humans in their territory. Their numbers grew with each passing second as they flooded out from their colony.

What was I supposed to do? I held the black bow in my right hand, but…how could I possibly fire it without another hand to draw back the arrow?!

"Greed, this sucks," I grumbled.

"Oh, ye of little imagination! You might not have a hand, but you've still got magic. Use it to move the string. Even you should be capable of that much."

"Well, here goes nothing."

I poured my magical energy through the bow, focusing on the string. To my amazement, as I centered my thoughts on pulling the string taut, it moved. Then I turned my thoughts toward loading the bow with a magic arrow. It crackled to life on the drawn string.

I was ready.

"Whoa! I did it!" I cried.

"Your form could use some work," Greed sniffed. "Anyway, better get a shot off quick. We're about to drown in that ocean of orcs."

I wasn't used to holding the bow in my right hand. I wasn't remotely used to loading and aiming the bow with magic. All the same, I poured 10 percent of my stats into the weapon to engage the First Level secret technique. I felt the familiar pull of my energy draining into the ravenous weapon as it transformed before my eyes from a plain black bow into a greatbow of uncanny angles.

I aimed the Apocalyptic weapon toward the orcs and loosed the Bloody Ptarmigan. However, it seemed Greed had neglected to fill me in on one important little detail.

"Oh, did I forget to mention?" he said as the arrow arced gracefully through the air. "I'm not going to be your guidance system during training. So you better make sure your aim is on point."

"You tell me that now?! *After* I fire?!"

I had been so sure that Greed would correct my aim, as he usually did, that my wild attack barely even grazed the edge of the incoming horde. Essentially, I'd missed them completely.

"You're just…an astoundingly awful shot, Fate."

"Give me a break…" I muttered.

Behind me, I heard Eris and Myne sigh in joint disappointment.

"Oh, my," said Eris. "You've really been relying on Greed to do *all* the work *all* this time?"

"It's past time you learned to fight using your own power," said Myne. "Like me."

I watched as Myne gently patted her black axe, Sloth. In her case, she didn't really have a choice but to fight with her own power; her axe was pretty much always asleep. But never mind her! I had to put those thoughts aside and concentrate.

"Better make sure the next one doesn't miss," chuckled Greed.

"Yeah, yeah."

As I looked out over the incoming tidal wave of orcs, I could feel in my bones that this was going to be much more difficult than refining my swordsmanship. Unlike with the sword, until this moment, I'd completely relied on Greed's support to hit all my shots.

"If you won't help me, then I'll just help myself!" I shouted.

"Fire until they go down!" shouted Greed. "And don't forget about your stats!"

That was how it started: four weeks of absolute hell that Myne and Eris called "training." I spent days firing the Bloody Ptarmigan attack over and over again to increase my mastery of it. Once the orc waves thinned, Eris and Myne took turns sparring with me. By the end of each round, I felt like little more than a dirty rag lying crumpled on the ground. Eris even said as much to my face. Despite my exhaustion, I wasn't allowed to take breaks. Every time I started to get woozy and fall asleep, Eris attempted to use her Charm ability on me. She called it mental training, but I couldn't tell if she was being honest.

"Why don't you just fall for me, Fate? It'll be better for both of us," she said after yet another attempt.

"You say that, but I can never tell if you're joking or not."

Eris pouted in protest.

Well, even though at times I felt I couldn't fully trust her, Eris really did take good care of me. For the entire month of training, she traveled to Babylon whenever our supplies dwindled, and she never complained about it. She was no weakling either. The entire journey to Babylon and back only took her a couple of hours. I had a feeling she was going easy on me when we sparred too.

"Myne's the lookout tonight," Eris said one night. "So let's snuggle up together, shall we, Fate?"

"Always looking for ways to Charm me, huh?"

“You bet! And just so you know, it comes from my Skill of Mortal Sin. It might be weaker than the starvation of your Gluttony, but if you can learn to survive the full power of my Charm, then at the very least you’ll be able to survive and endure what you fear most…the desire to devour your beloved Roxy.”

“What?!” I yelped. “Are you serious?! Then give me all the Charm you’ve got!”

Eris giggled. “I must say, I do so love that about you, Fate. Well, then, get ready!”

The full power of Eris’s Charm was incredible. I felt dizzy. Blood poured from my nose.

“I’m not done! You won’t withstand another round of this!”

I grunted as I fought back, my hand clapped to my face. “No way! I can take whatever you throw at me!”

In the end, I lost waves of stats to Bloody Ptarmigan and waves of blood to Eris’s Charm, but after one month, the orc colonies grew eerily quiet. I wondered if their silence was a white flag of surrender. I could now handle firing the Bloody Ptarmigan attack without any help from Greed, and I could endure Eris’s Charms. Between these two triumphs, I was finally strong enough to bring back my left arm using the Fourth Level secret technique.

“Congratulations, Fate!” said Eris. “I guess we have to stop calling you Rag Boy now!”

Myne nodded. “That’s great news, Rag Boy. Congratulations.”

Greed concurred. “Congratulations. You did great, Rag Boy.”

“Why are all three of you calling me that?! And—hold on, hold your horses. Aren’t your congratulations a bit premature? I still only have one arm!”

I hadn’t even turned Greed from his standard sword form into the black stave yet. I hadn’t done anything. Maybe the perception of time distorted when you’d been alive as long as Eris, Myne, and Greed had. But they were right—it was time to get started. I’d defeated so many orcs that my stats were firmly back in the Domain of E, far past the normal human stat cap. I took a deep breath and changed Greed into the black stave. It was time to get my arm back. It was time to use Twilight Healing.

“Okay, Greed. Take 40 percent of my stats!”

“Don’t mind if I do! Now, kid—don’t let me down!”

The stave transformed in my hands, growing heavier as it enlarged. Even without any of my onlookers saying anything, I felt acutely that this new weapon held the power to heal. I focused on my missing arm and inhaled.

“Let’s do it!” I shouted. “Twilight Healing!”

A crimson seal etched with magic runes formed under my feet. At the same time and just as suddenly, white flame sparked to life at my shoulder. As the flame burned slowly downward, my arm started to rebuild itself.

Bone, then flesh, then skin. The licking fire reconstructed my limb from bicep to elbow, then forearm, and finally down to my hand, palm, and fingers.

I clenched my left hand into a fist, wrestling with the odd sensation of a new arm where just moments before there had only been the memory of one. My regrown muscles flexed as my fingers curled into my palm at my command.

I no longer held any doubts as to the true capabilities of the black stave. My arm was back.

"How's it feel, Fate?"

"Just glad to have it. Thanks, Greed."

"Now you can use the bow with both hands again!"

I turned to Myne and Eris and bowed to them. "Myne, Eris, thank you! I got my arm back!"

"I think you've trained enough for the time being," said Eris.

"Now we can go home," added Myne.

I nodded. It had been a long month of camping out in Galia. We were all in need of a rest in a soft bed for a change.

I initially assumed we would all return together, but Eris had urgent business to attend to. "I'll see you in Seifort one month from now," she said.

"Until then," I replied.

Myne and I took a detour on the way back as well, specifically to stop by the capital city of Galia, which had lain in ruin for thousands of years. She said she needed to see something.

That visit was my first to that city. Even though its inhabitants had died many long years ago, the capital still stood tall. Buildings that reached as high as the clouds were lined up one after another, and monstrous roc birds roamed the skies. I would never forget the sight of Myne standing in silence as she stared out at the shell of this empty, broken city. All I could do was wait until she was ready to depart.

After, we headed north until we saw the border city of Babylon, then continued past it. If we stopped there now, we would only run into Lady Roxy again, and I couldn't yet control my Gluttonous hunger. Our destination was the Barbatos estate of Hausen, where Aaron Barbatos was waiting.

We walked toward Hausen without rest. Myne, like me, seemed to look forward to seeing Aaron again. I could tell because she never once asked to pause and take a break at any of the several towns along the way.

When we rolled into Hausen, we saw that the estate was still in the midst of reconstruction. Aaron had sensed us coming long before we set foot inside the castle grounds, and he waited there to greet us warmly. He was truly happy to be reunited with us. He even held a small party to celebrate.

At this party, Aaron told me something unbelievable. He wanted to adopt me as his son and have me inherit the Barbatos name, as well as take

his place as the current head of his ancient family of holy knights. I tried to refuse, but Aaron pleaded. “Please, grant this old man one last wish before he dies.”

Under that pressure, I couldn’t possibly turn him down. Aaron and I had fought side by side to free Hausen from the control of the crowned beast known as The Genesis of Death, a vengeful lich. Completing that task with him had carved a place for me in Aaron’s heart.

“Now that you’re the head of the Barbatos family, you’re free to live as you wish,” he said.

However, I had one condition. I would take the Barbatos family name only once he understood that I might stand against the other holy knights of Seifort (excluding the Hart family, of course). I could not abide by their actions.

“As you like,” said Aaron. “Didn’t I just say? You are free to live as you wish. As Fate Barbatos, you will live by your own decisions.”

I had no remaining reason to turn him down. With that, my decision was made. As the new head of the Barbatos family, I worked together with Aaron to rebuild Hausen. Sometimes even Myne raised her sleepy head to help out. Those days passed peacefully and with a constant stream of pleasant surprises. Familiar faces visited the castle, and I learned that during my time in Galia, Aaron had awakened to new powers of his own.

I wished I could have stayed in Hausen longer, but after a month, we had nearly reached our promised meeting time with Eris. Because he had business in Seifort, Aaron decided to accompany us. He left the remainder of the reconstruction to his trusted advisors, and together, the three of us headed to the capital of Seifort.

However, on our way, my heart clenched for some unknown reason, so Myne and I had made our fateful detour to the Hart family estate.

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I placed another log on the now dying fire and let these old memories fade from my mind. As a slight chill blew in from outside, Myne shifted slightly, resettling to use my thighs as a pillow. Outside, the fierce snowstorm began to calm. We would head out at first light.

Chapter 3:
The Black Knight

AARON AND I walked through the halls of Seifort's castle.

"Is something wrong, Fate?" Aaron asked.

The capital of Seifort. After so long, I was finally back in the city where my journey had begun, but rather than joy, I felt unease. Since I'd inherited the Barbatos name as Aaron's heir, we were required to report the news in an audience with the king of Seifort himself.

My feelings on this matter were difficult to put into words. When Aaron and I passed through the castle gates earlier, the gatekeepers were, as I'd expected, not holy knights. They were mere second-class citizens, just as I'd been: day laborers the holy knights hired to do their dirty work for them. At a glance, it was clear that the vaunted holy knights had not changed their ways in the months since I'd left.

These gatekeepers might as well have been empty shells. Their faces bruised and battered, their gazes as hollow as the sightless eyes of dead fish. They cowered in fear at the sight of me and Aaron. In their eyes, I was just another holy knight. I had become a symbol of fear and oppression. My heart cried to see them shrink back from me. I knew that fear firsthand. I knew it so well that it hurt.

But there was nothing I could do for the forsaken. At least, not yet.

"It's nothing," I replied, brushing these thoughts from my mind.

"I see," said Aaron, pointedly staring at my skull mask.

Aaron didn't like that I wore this mask to hide my face—and my identity—from those around me. However, in this case, I conceded that he had a point. We were meeting the king, after all.

All the way to Seifort, Aaron and I had argued in circles over whether it was right and proper for me to wear my black skull mask in the presence of the king. It was no ordinary mask. Not only did it hide my face, it was imbued with magic which concealed my identity. Regardless of what Aaron said, I stood firm. Back in Galia, I'd decided I wouldn't remove the mask until I had the strength to meet Lady Roxy face to face.

"I know what you're thinking," I said. "But the mask stays on."

"You said as much earlier. But Fate…"

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have a king to meet."

Aaron grabbed me by my collar and pulled me back. "What do you intend to do in there all by yourself?!" he chided me. "Fine, have it your way. The mask stays on, but *you* follow *my* lead."

Aaron let go and walked on ahead of me. His body language said it all: playtime was over.

We arrived at a towering set of heavy doors adorned in regal gold and silver. Their extravagance only emphasized the power of the royalty who

waited beyond this threshold. Aaron gave me another sidelong glance as we stood before them. “Are you ready?” he asked.

“Whenever you are.”

Aaron chuckled. “I don’t know what happened in Galia, Fate, but it certainly gave you some courage, didn’t it? Well, let’s go.”

The doors swung open. A carpet of deep red ran from the wide doorway all the way down to the king’s throne. Holy knights lined either side of the carpet, assembled in stern rows facing one another. Pressure emanated from them. All these knights had gathered because they’d heard the news: the Barbatos family line, long thought dead, had returned with a new heir. Perhaps the king himself had informed them. Not that the rumors bothered me in the slightest.

These families had obviously gathered specifically to find out *who* Aaron had taken on as his scion. They wanted to know who I was. Their stares pierced my black armor like knives in search of weakness. But with my skull mask on, none of them could discern a single thing.

We quickly strode past the holy knights as they muttered among themselves, and we knelt before the throne. A veil too heavy to see past hung between us and the figure who sat upon it. Whatever the king looked like, whoever he was, he hid from us as well as I hid my face from the holy knights.

Two spear-wielding knights stood on either side of the veil, silent bodyguards. The pair were fully decked out in pristine white armor. A strange, intimidating air rolled forth from them.

Aaron bowed before the throne and apologized for everything that had happened in his absence. He then moved on to the topic of his family’s future, where he introduced me. “This man will take up my name and lead my family: Fate Barbatos. He is young, only sixteen years of age, but he is growing to become—no, he *has* become a most capable man in his own right. His actions speak for him. Fate is the one who felled the Divine Dragon in Galia.”

I bowed deeply to the king as my name was spoken, but at Aaron’s mention of the Divine Dragon, derisive, contemptuous laughter burst up around us. To the knights, Aaron’s claims were ludicrous. The idea that someone had defeated a beast widely known to be invincible was absurd. All they could do was laugh. Even in the presence of the king, they heckled Aaron from both sides of the carpet, many accusing him of senility in his old age.

Then, a single holy knight in golden armor and a gaudy crimson cape broke rank and stepped onto the red carpet leading to the king’s throne. This gave me pause. *Wait a second. I know that guy.*

Rudolph Lanchester—the arrogant holy knight who governed the city named for his family. Myne and I had passed through it on our trek to Galia. He’d insulted Myne, and Myne had launched him far off into the distance

with a single swing of her black axe. I was amazed to see that he'd survived the flight unscathed.

"My king," Rudolph said, "you *cannot* expect your holy knights to welcome an individual who dares to utter such blatant lies before your noble throne. Allow me to peel this liar's skin from his bones, that we might see his true self!"

I couldn't believe he could still make such bold proclamations after Myne had handled him like a child. Perhaps his ego hadn't gone so unscathed after all.

The king said nothing in reply. The white knights on either side of the veil remained silent. Apparently, Rudolph took this as tacit approval. An unsettling smile crossed his smug face as he did the unthinkable: he drew his sword.

Hold on a second, I thought, aren't we at an audience before the king?!

Rudolph unsheathed his blade and leveled it at us. Aaron opened his mouth to speak, but I held out a hand to stop him.

"This might be for the best," I said. "At least, it's probably the easiest way to make them understand."

Rudolph's face screwed up in an indignant snarl, incensed. "It seems you don't know who you're talking to," he spat. "I am the great Rudolph Lanchester, a member of one of the five esteemed families of holy knights! How about that?!"

"Can we get this over with?" I asked. "Or is your sword purely decorative?"

"You son of a—"

With gritted teeth, Rudolph swung his sword directly for my neck. His strike moved slowly—excruciatingly so. The holy blade cut a crooked, amateurish line through the air. Additionally, his footwork was horrendous.

I didn't need to move an inch. I raised neither hand nor blade to guard myself against his clumsy attack. I let his swing find its mark. The instant Rudolph's sword bounced off my neck, his expression changed. All that bombastic confidence vanished like smoke.

"Impossible! This…this is impossible!" He pulled his sword back and swung again, but the results were no different.

He couldn't touch me while I stood in the Domain of E. My power had grown from the seed of a monster, the one they called the Heavenly Calamity: the Divine Dragon. The difference between my stats and Rudolph's was so absolute that we essentially existed in different dimensions. To damage anyone in the Domain of E, you had to be in the Domain of E yourself. Rudolph wasn't, so no matter how much time he wasted trying to behead me, all he would hurt was his own arm.

"At the very least, I will unveil the buffoon hiding behind that carnival mask!" Rudolph shrieked in desperation.

Now that he'd thoroughly embarrassed himself before the king, Rudolph scrambled to recover by announcing that he would use the Identify skill to reveal my identity. I preferred not to reveal the truth of my stats just yet, so I watched the narrowing of his eyes for the particular movement that signaled the use of Identify. This was a trick I'd learned from Aaron—a technique that specifically stopped Identify from working.

As soon as I spotted the twitch of his Identify, I let out a silent surge of magical energy around me. The technique was only meant to momentarily blind one's opponent, but Rudolph clapped his hand over his eyes and fell to his knees, screaming in shock and pain.

It seemed the effect of a magical burst in the Domain of E was far stronger than I'd expected. Rudolph's eyes had ruptured. Blood dripped down his cheeks from under his palm. But I wasn't done yet. I unsheathed the black sword, Greed.

Just as Rudolph had deemed it necessary to test my abilities, now it was my turn to test his.

Chapter 4:
The Bloody Winds of Change

SENSING THE STORM of murderous intent swirling around me, Rudolph threw his sword to the side and cowered. If I'd found anything about the situation funny, I'd have laughed, given his arrogance mere moments earlier.

"You dare call yourself one among the five esteemed families?" I said coldly.

"Wait! Wait, I see the error of my ways now, so please, please…"

"Enough. You wish to be treated like a knight? Then act like one. People like you soil the name of holy knights."

The sight of Rudolph—bleeding from the eyes, begging, cowering in fear—disgusted me. His whole life, he had turned a blind eye to his city's treatment of the weak, and now he had paid for his inhumanity with his sight. In his city, I would have been branded. Forsaken. I was sick of looking at him. Sick of looking at him on his knees, acting like the wretch he had always been. I would be his reckoning.

I swung the black sword down.

"No!" Rudolph shrieked. "Please, *no*!"

His desperate scream echoed through the halls, punctuated by the high-pitched clang of metal on metal. My black blade—the messenger of my declaration of war—had been stopped by a gleaming white spear. One of the throne guards had moved in swiftly, stopping the black sword's blade a breath away from cowering Rudolph's neck.

That wasn't all. The other white knight's spear touched my throat. The point of its blade cut just barely into my skin.

I slowly sheathed Greed, watching my bright blood drip onto the crimson carpet. I hadn't put all my strength into my attack, but the speed of the white knights still awed me. They'd also revealed that their attacks could draw my blood, meaning they were in the Domain of E. They were strong.

The crowd of holy knights began to shout excuses. Garbled justifications calling Rudolph useless, or pointing out how effortlessly I'd been stopped by the white knights. In response to the babble, one of the white knights drove the butt of their spear into the stone floor. The sound sent the holy knights into a stunned silence. As I looked around and saw that the blood had drained from their faces, I realized this might well be the first time any of them had seen the true power of these two white knights.

Listening to the uproar, Rudolph's attitude shifted once more. Thinking himself saved by the king's bodyguards, his fear dissipated. "You masked clown!" he shouted. "You see what happens, fool? The king has chosen to aid me! Not you! This is why nobodies like you are no better than the forsaken trash that live in the slu—huh…?"

Rudolph's torrent of abuse ceased with a grunt. His punishment had arrived, though not by my hand. The white knights he'd mistaken for saviors thrust their spears through both of his arms. Then, before he even had a chance to turn his startlement into another scream, they drove the spears through to his heart in the form of a cross. On their white blades, golden-armored Rudolph was lifted into the air for all the holy knights to see. Then, finally, the white knights wrenched their spears free. Rudolph's body thudded to the ground, dead. His fresh blood stained the carpet a deeper shade of crimson.

The assembled holy knights looked on, stupefied. They had never seen an execution like this.

One of the white-armored bodyguards turned to the crowd. "Rudolph Lanchester has forfeited his seat. We assume there are no further objections."

The knight's voice was cold and emotionless. It was impossible to tell whether it belonged to a man or a woman. Regardless, the holy knights understood the message: any further objections to my appointment to their number would bring forth another rain of blood. None spoke a word. Instead, they could only stare at the lifeless face of Rudolph as his blood stained the red carpet.

With heavy steps, the two white knights returned to their places. From behind the veil, I heard the king's applause. I still couldn't see his face behind the heavy curtain, but it was clear these events had pleased him.

"The king welcomes you," the bodyguards said. "He expects great things."

I dropped to one knee and bowed. Then I raised my head, a gesture that concerned the white knights.

"Oh? That look on your face… Do you have something to say, Fate Barbatos?"

"I do not mean to speak above my station," I said. "But I'd like to make a request, if I may."

"Speak."

The audience chamber remained completely silent. Everyone's gaze was glued to me, waiting to hear what I would say. I hadn't told Aaron what I had in mind, because I was certain he would oppose my idea and tell me to be more careful. But even after I'd journeyed so far, Seifort hadn't changed. I knew I couldn't leave without so much as making an attempt.

"Would it be possible to send the forsaken people of this kingdom, those born with so-called useless skills, to the Barbatos estate?"

Aaron's eyes widened at my words, and for a moment, he looked ready to interrupt. An instant later, his face softened into a kindly smile. *If that is what you wish*, his smile said, *then as always, live as you will*.

The Barbatos estate, Hausen, was still in the midst of reconstruction. More than anything else, it needed people. The people who lived there now were those who had lost their homes and been driven into the wilderness; in

their own way, they were forsaken too. However, though they lacked meaningful combat skills, these people were far from useless. Given time and opportunity, they would develop trades of their own, as well as the ability to produce or craft worthwhile goods. They only needed a chance to change their lot. We would never learn their true potential unless we worked together with them as equals. But to do all that, we needed people, and I wanted to start with those forsaken in the capital of Seifort.

There would be great meaning in starting with the people at the heart of the kingdom. If the lands of Barbatos prospered thanks to the influx of the forsaken, we might be able to attract similar people from other estates. It would be no simple task to regrow our estate in this way, but I had to try.

As such, I started by facing my greatest obstacle. The commoners of the capital of Seifort lived under the direct rule of the king, and I was essentially asking him to grant me his citizens. Aaron understood the monumental weight of my request, thus his surprise.

Conversely, the white knights seemed outraged, but behind the veil, the king remained silent. Time passed and I waited, wondering if perhaps I had asked for too much. Then, the silhouetted figure gave the slightest of nods.

Could this mean…?

"The king has agreed to your request. The forsaken of Seifort are free to move to the Barbatos estate. Use them well in rebuilding your lands."

"You have my thanks."

I bowed and glanced at Aaron, still standing by my side. He was also bowing, but he returned my glance with a wink. I'd stunned him at first, yet he was now fully on board with my idea.

After our audience with the fickle and bloodthirsty king of Seifort was finally over, Aaron and I walked back down the long corridors of the castle.

"I almost froze in shock," Aaron said. "I never could have imagined you would make such a bold request, especially at your very first audience with the king!"

"Well, securing people for Hausen is one of our top priorities. And, well, let's just say I have my reasons."

"It seems so," Aaron mused, his mind seeming to slip into the past. "Hm… By the way, Fate."

"Yes, Aaron?"

"About young Rudolph Lanchester. If the king's bodyguards hadn't intervened, would you have killed him?"

There was something sad in Aaron's face as he asked this question. I couldn't bring myself to answer him directly.

"I am what he said I am. Forsaken. Even if I become a holy knight, I'll never forget my origins."

"Fate…" Aaron said softly.

I changed the subject. “Come on, let’s head to Barbatos Manor. It hasn’t been used for many, many years now, and I’ll bet it’s covered in dust. We have to get busy cleaning!”

Aaron laughed. “I suppose you’re right. And we’d best hurry before we make her angry.”

He meant Myne, who was waiting for our return in said incredibly dusty, exceptionally leaky manor that we really, really needed to clean.

Later, when I thought back to that audience with the king, I realized two familiar faces had been missing from the audience. Lady Roxy wasn’t who I meant—she was still in Galia and would remain stationed there until her duties were fulfilled. Rather, I had expected to see the Vlerick siblings, my former employers. I’d killed Hado with my own hands, so of course he was absent, but there had been no sign of the oldest brother, Rafale, or of his younger sister, Memil. Before his death, Hado had told me they’d left for a mountain city in the east, so… Perhaps they had still not returned.

As Aaron and I headed to Barbatos Manor, all I could think of was what the Vlericks might be up to. Rafale was nothing if not deviously cunning.

Chapter 5:
A Relaxing Respite

FROM THE CASTLE, we headed back to the Holy Knight District and continued on until we stood before Barbatos Manor. Its size was truly impressive, but unfortunately, there was no avoiding the fact that the manor had lost much of its luster over the years. Vines and a variety of weeds grew thickly over the walls, and its once-respectable gardens now resembled a jungle. The plant life was so dense that I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that the manor gardens contained an entire ecosystem all their own.

I'd worked as an apprentice gardener at Hart Manor, so I desperately wanted to begin fixing the overgrown gardens myself. However, before that, we had to deal with the manor's rotting interior.

As we opened the rusted gate to the manor grounds, I looked over at the stately house that stood next door. The building itself resembled Barbatos Manor in terms of layout, but every last corner of the surrounding gardens on the other side of the wall was immaculately kept. I could only call it majestic. I also knew it intimately, as, for a time, I'd worked on those very gardens myself.

Yup. The Barbatos family's next-door neighbor was the esteemed house of Hart.

I'd been dumbfounded to learn this. Who would have guessed that the two families lived side by side? When I thought back, I did remember looking over at the Barbatos gardens while a servant of the Hart family and being bewildered by their dreadful state. But back then, I'd been so busy learning the ropes of my job that I'd never thought to learn more about the old, abandoned manor.

If only I'd taken the time back then. I'd have had some time to mentally prepare!

I'd left Lady Roxy a letter back in Galia—my confession detailing everything I'd done, the truth of my Gluttony, every lie I'd told her. How could I possibly face her as a neighbor? I felt like I couldn't ever remove my skull mask again…and also like I didn't want to. Worry flooded my heart as I stood there, staring at the Hart Manor grounds, opening and closing the squeaky rusted gate to Barbatos Manor.

"Well, are you coming or going?" Aaron asked impatiently. "Either way, make up your mind!"

"Okay!" I agreed. "Let's go inside!"

Even then, I stood in place, absolutely rigid, as I opened and closed the gate, staring.

"Is something bothering you, Fate?" Aaron gently placed a hand on my shoulder. "You do this every time we come here."

I laughed nervously. "Not *every* time, surely…"

Aaron seemed to realize something in that moment, and he nodded to himself. “Ah, I see. Now I get it. It’s Hart Manor that has you so enchanted. The head of that family is a strong young woman by the name of Roxy Hart.” Then Aaron turned to me with a knowing grin.

No way—has he worked out how I feel just by the way I look at the manor?! Once again, the keen eyes of the Blessed Blade left me profoundly impressed.

“When we first started on the reconstruction of Hausen, Roxy passed through on her way to Galia. She and her troops supplied critical support. As thanks for the help, I taught her some of my best techniques. She’s quite the warrior, to be sure. You’re just like her, really; another young holy knight at the head of a holy knight family. It’s only natural you’d be curious about her. We’ll have to head over for a visit and a dedicated sparring session. I’m sure you must be itching to test your blade against hers!”

Oh. I guess those sharp eyes aren’t quite as sharp as I thought.

Admittedly, his conclusion was in character. Aaron was devoted to the art of combat, and he preferred expressing himself through action rather than words. I still had no intention of heading next door all casually, like “Hey! We’re neighbors! Let’s fight!”

Besides, I’d already been forced into one duel with Lady Roxy. When I thought about her back then—and Aaron in this moment—I had to wonder if all holy knights were predisposed to being a bit battle-crazy. I didn’t want to think about that too much, though.

In any case, I let out a sigh of relief at knowing my secret was safe, and I finally headed through the gates into the manor. The scarred, cracked path to the main building looked like it had seen recent combat, and no trace of overgrowth remained upon it. On arrival, Aaron had used his Grand Cross skill to blast the plants away, roots and all. I regretted not stopping him earlier. Destroying all those plants had made my groundskeeping job that much harder.

When we finally reached the manor doors, I opened them—

—to find a giant black axe hurtling straight for our heads.

“Whoa!”

Aaron and I dove to either side just in time for the axe to pass over our skulls. It crashed into the gardens with a roar, cratering the ground and sending all the nearby plant life flying.

Guys! The gardens! I wailed internally. For the love of everything holy, please think of the gardens!

Then the owner of the axe stepped into view. Her face was the definition of dissatisfaction. “You’re late.”

This displeasure—and that axe—belonged to Myne, the white-haired young woman who bore Wrath, another skill of Mortal Sin. Her deep red eyes were so intense that it was difficult to hold her gaze.

However, thanks to how far we’d traveled together, I had developed the ability to read the subtle anger levels on Myne’s largely expressionless

face. She was currently at about level two, and I had a pretty good idea of where that anger had come from as well.

"I'm hungry," Myne said.

Right on the money. Aaron and I had left for the castle early in the morning, and it was now well past noon. Myne had waited here the whole time, getting hungrier and hungrier.

"If I'd known this was going to happen, I would have come with you," she said. "At least I could have made some food at the castle."

Made some food?! You would have walked in like you owned the place and stolen whatever you felt like eating. And I bet anybody who tried to stop you would have been sent through the window!

I had to be honest: I was glad we'd left Myne behind. That girl bowed to nobody, which would have turned our already-eventful audience with the king into a case of serious disrespect and possibly even treason. On top of that, Aaron's relentless appetite for battle could only be matched by Myne's. The only real difference between them was that Myne cared much, much less about who exactly she was fighting.

All the same, I was getting hungry too. We had a few provisions leftover, but I figured we might as well go out into the city for a big lunch, now that we'd made it through that audience with the king. That would give us a good chunk of energy to kickstart the task of cleaning the manor. I proposed the idea immediately.

Myne and Aaron concurred, but I had one condition before we left: Myne had to leave her axe at the manor. That would guarantee at least some measure of peace. Miraculously, Myne agreed, and so with some relief, the three of us took off for my favorite local tavern.

However, I couldn't help but wonder where Eris had got to. Surely she'd arrived in Seifort by now. We'd agreed to meet at Barbatos Manor, but we'd been there a few days and heard no word from her. Greed and Myne had both searched for traces of her magical energy in the air but come up empty-handed. Myne thought it possible that Eris was hiding herself. I worried she was caught up in something she couldn't tell us about.

Even so, I knew Eris's strength now. She could handle anything that came up on her own. For now, we could only wait.

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My favorite tavern was a far cry from a first-class restaurant. Rather, it was the kind of dive you'd find in the side streets of any town. The place was mostly empty because we'd arrived so late after lunch. I brought Myne and Aaron inside, and we took a seat at the counter.

The counter corner was my usual spot, and to my relief, I found no mourning flowers there when we sat down. That meant the barkeep assumed I was still alive. Myne took a seat next to me, and Aaron took the seat next to her.

"I have to ask, Fate," said Aaron. "Why not a table?"

“Oh, sorry. I always sit here, so I’m most comfortable at the counter. We can move to a table if you like.”

“No, no, just curious. The counter is fine,” said Aaron, taking a menu in hand.

Myne, however, did nothing. She didn’t touch the menu, let alone look at it. As per usual, she meant to leave it up to me to order her food.

The barkeep gingerly approached us, something of a strained look on his face. The few other customers leveled the same tense stare in our direction. I knew the reason: my presence, alongside Aaron’s. Holy knights never ate at little taverns like this one, and our choice to sit casually at the counter had the barkeep even more terrified.

So, I took off my mask, revealing my face to the barkeep. I had no need to hide my identity here. “Long time no see.”

The barkeep let out a yelp of alarm that ended in a sigh of relief. “Fate?!” he asked, spilling the cups of water he held as he walked up to me. “But what the…huh? What the hell happened?!”

I couldn’t give him all the details yet, but I told him a little about how I’d happened to become the adopted heir to the Barbatos name.

Upon hearing this, the barkeep gaped. He turned to Aaron, studying his face up close. In the next instant, he dropped to his knees behind the bar. “I knew you for a holy knight, but…I had no idea you were the great Aaron Barbatos!”

“Please, there’s no need for ceremony,” said Aaron. “I’m here as a customer, so treat me as you would any other.”

“But…”

The barkeep’s face twisted in a half-grimace/half-smile as Aaron once again picked up the menu and placed an order. I worried the barkeep might faint from shock—he was so flustered that I could have sworn his head was steaming. It was like he’d become an entirely different person. Where was the confident guy who always playfully teased me? I felt a little sorry for having caught him off balance.

I ordered fish for Myne and myself, knowing it was always excellent. A short while later, the barkeep came back with our food and a bottle of fine wine in hand.

“Fate, we have to celebrate!” he said. “Maybe I don’t know the whole nitty-gritty of what all went down, but success is success, so let’s celebrate yours! After all, I promised you, right? I said, ‘The next time you come back, I’ll bring out the good stuff!’”

I was touched. “Yeah, I remember.”

When I’d left Seifort for Galia, the barkeep had given me a bottle of wine as a parting gift. He’d even promised me a bottle of the high-quality stuff upon my return. I hadn’t actually expected him to remember. He popped the cork and poured the wine into four glasses. Even though Aaron’s presence obviously made him nervous, that fake smile was gone. With a genuine grin on his face, he raised his glass to me.

“Here’s to your return to Seifort and to your future endeavors as a holy knight! Cheers!”

Aaron, Myne, and I raised our own glasses.

“Cheers!”

We drank. I had never imagined I’d come back to something like this—a moment so sweet. It reminded me of an old peace and quiet I’d long since forgotten.

This little tavern hadn’t changed a bit, and for that, I was grateful.

Chapter 6:
A Fresh Start

NOW THAT WE HAD the king's permission to invite the forsaken of Seifort to move to Hausen under the Barbatos family's protection, we started work at sunup the following day.

Aaron tasked himself with finding and hiring a carpenter to repair the manor roof. We'd cleaned and tidied the interior the previous day, and as a result, it was a little more respectable. However, the roof leaked, damaged from many long years without care. Aaron and I couldn't do anything about that ourselves. We needed a professional.

My own priority was to get the ball rolling with the forsaken. I would've been fine handling the job on my own, but Myne insisted on coming with me. Fortunately, she left her black axe Sloth at the manor again, so at least things couldn't get too out of hand. As we left the manor, I felt my thoughts drifting to Myne's Wrath, at which point I felt her glaring at me.

"You're thinking about what might happen if I let my Wrath get out of hand, aren't you?"

"Uh…"

Had she read my mind?! I supposed I shouldn't have been caught off guard. We'd traveled together a long way, and we'd learned to read each other over that time. She'd seen straight through my expression and body language. *No point lying to her about it now*.

"Yeah," I confessed. "That's exactly what I was thinking about."

Myne's jaw clenched.

"Look," I went on, "we've traveled a lot together, so I've seen a few things. How am I supposed to forget the time you launched that holy knight into the sky for being rude? Or how about that other time you literally broke a bunch of adventurers' backs because they tried to pick a fight?"

Myne let out a great sigh. "But I went easy on those guys…"

"That's what you call going easy?"

I really thought she'd crossed a line, and here Myne thought she'd handled them with kid gloves. I wanted to ask exactly what about her rampages qualified as "going easy," but then again, she bore Wrath. If she fully unleashed that rage, it would probably end in a rainstorm of blood. So, if she said she went easy, then as a fellow bearer of a skill of Mortal Sin, I understood. After all, I had my own troubles keeping my Gluttonous urges under control.

My Gluttony was much calmer and quieter now, but that wasn't all on me. I had Luna's support from within. Since the battle at Galia, she'd appeared in my dreams more frequently. She talked about Myne a lot, and because of our chats, I'd discovered that Myne was Luna's—

"Fate? Are you listening?"

“Yeah, I’m listening. What are we talking about?”

Myne leaped into the air and grabbed my ear, which she yanked close to her mouth. “Listen when I’m speaking to you!”

The pain was excruciating. Despite being in the Domain of E, I felt like my ear was going to be torn off.

“Fate. This is Myne,” she said. “Where. Are. We. Going?”

“I’ll answer! I’ll answer! Just spare me my ear! Please!”

Myne let go of my ear, and I touched it to make sure it was still there. To my relief, I found it in one piece. If I wanted to keep my appendages, I had to be more careful about getting lost in my own thoughts. Still, I didn’t recall her being quite this vicious when we’d last traveled together… “We’re heading to a church a short way from here. It’s in the slums.”

“Are we going to pray? That doesn’t seem very like you, Fate.”

“How rude! Even I…”

But I realized in that moment that since leaving my village for Seifort years ago, I hadn’t done anything even remotely resembling prayer. Back when my father was alive, it had been part of our daily routine, but…when I thought about it, losing someone so pious to illness had made a huge impact on me. When I lost my father, I’d also lost my faith.

“In any case,” I said, “lots of people in the slums gather at the church. I think if we want to start moving people to the Barbatos estate, we’ll want the church’s help. My word alone won’t be especially convincing, let alone trustworthy. I’m no better than a stranger to these people. But they trust the church.”

“You’re smarter than you look, Fate.” Myne clicked her tongue, and a hint of disappointment flashed across her face. I had a hunch she’d been hoping I’d rely on her more, and I decided to see if my hunch was right.

“But you know,” I said, “I’m really glad to have you here with me, Myne. I’ve never done anything like this before, so it’s nice to have the help.”

The words floated through the air, and the tiniest grin grew upon Myne’s ordinarily stoic face. “Guess I’ve got no choice but to help you out, then,” she giggled.

It worked! She really did want me to lean on her. But there was something…nefarious in that giggle, and a moment later I understood why.

“Okay, Fate,” Myne said. “If the church doesn’t listen to you, I’ll destroy it.”

“If they don’t listen, we break them.” Yep…that sure sounded just like the Myne I knew. With that battle-hungry attitude, I’d never be able to really rely on her.

“Uh, you know what? I think it might be for the best if I handle things first. It wouldn’t be right for me to lean on you for something so small, you know?”

“If you say so.” Myne was clearly sad to be sidelined.

I'd gotten her spirits up only to knock them down a moment later. I tried to think of some compromise that would save this situation. "But when it comes time to negotiate, you can stand behind me with a firm, strong glare. The kind of silent pressure that lets everyone know we mean business. Could you do that for me?"

"I see. Yes, I think I can handle that."

That's a relief. At least now I can rest assured that nobody's going home with any bruises or broken bones.

We continued walking toward the church when I noticed something that stopped me in my tracks. The sight of an old place I'd known all too well. It felt…nostalgic, even. As I stood there, contemplating it, Myne walked straight into me, knocking me down.

"Huh? What's wrong?" she asked, her head tilted to the side with curiosity. "Did you see something in that crumbling shamble of a house?"

She was right. This house was a crumbling shamble. A one-room ruin I'd lived in for five years. Even now, it was deserted. Empty. I'd abandoned it when I fled from the Vlerick family to work and live at Hart Manor, but despite months of my absence, it looked no different.

"Just…give me a minute, please." I didn't wait for Myne's reply. I pushed myself off the ground and walked over. I had to see the place for myself.

I placed a hand on the door as if I had been drawn to it. As expected, it was unlocked. Nothing was out of place inside, which didn't surprise me—nothing in this shack was worth stealing. A bed made of straw lay in the corner beside a beaten-up old desk and the half-melted remains of a candle on top of it. Time had stopped the moment I left this little room, and even though I'd returned, it remained frozen. This place would always be a symbol of my earlier life. As I took it in, I realized…I no longer felt anything for it.

"Fate, let's go," Myne called from outside.

"Yeah, I'll be there in a second."

I began to head back out the door when Greed decided to break his long silence, speaking through my Telepathy skill. *"You want to go back, Fate? Back to the time before we met?"*

"Ha. I'd rather be dead. We've only just started a new chapter."

"Indeed. Well, hop to it. If you make Myne angry, she'll start the next scene by tearing this place down around you!"

"Let's go, then."

I left my memories of that ruined house behind as I stepped through its old doors. Myne and I once again set off toward the slums and the church that had been built there.

Chapter 7:
The Old Church

MYNE AND I STOOD staring at the incredible line of people snaking its way out from the entrance of the church, our heads tilted in shared confusion. At first, I thought perhaps all these people had come to pray, but I knew better than anyone else that very few of those in the slums could be called faithful.

No one here had received the divine blessings of a useful skill, and because of this misfortune, they'd been forced into lives of great hardship and suffering. For those the gods had forsaken—the very reason for their place in society—faith was a horrible thing.

Some people tried to paint a prettier picture, spouting lines like "The gods are testing your faith," but by and large, those optimists had been born with valued skills or social standing. They wanted nothing more than to convince the forsaken to listen and obey.

For myself, when I'd lost my father, a man of strong faith himself, I had given up on prayer. Even now I believed that I'd made the right decision. In fact, I was sure of it.

My own struggles with faith aside, a staggering number of people were lined up in front of the church. As I moved into the crowd, a man saw me and let out a shriek of pure fear. He fled out of my way as quickly as he could. As more people became aware of my presence, they stared at me like they would at a fearsome beast. Their terror pulled them to the sides of the road. Some even dropped to their knees, hiding under their arms.

Myne glanced around at the panicking crowd, then looked directly at me with a sly smirk. "Did you do something to these people, Fate?"

"Of course not!"

Was it my skull mask? Or maybe the fact that I was a holy knight? No, unlike a holy knight, I wore all black. The family crest sewn into my clothes indicated my rank, but not everyone could see it right off the bat. Maybe these people were unconsciously reacting to the Domain of E and the overwhelming difference in our stats. The people of the slums lived in fear of the powerful, so their terror of me was perhaps unavoidable.

Myne shook her head, drawing the same conclusion. "You're not even that strong yet."

"You won't hear me disagreeing with you."

Judging by the look on her face, I expected I was in for a heavy sparring session when we returned to Barbatos Manor. If recent sessions were anything to go by, she'd leave me half-dead. She didn't let me off lightly anymore, and even with my Health Regen skill—plus Health Regen Boost—she went way too hard. Thanks to her, I'd become acutely aware of just how much damage I could take before I died.

Now that we both stood in the Domain of E, we could actually train together on (somewhat) equal footing. But because Myne was so *much* stronger than me, her attacks literally shattered my bones. Every time, she waited for me to heal…and then we repeated the process all over again. I feared my very bone structure was changing from the constant breakage. Fortunately, having gone through a similar hell in Galia, I could endure just this kind of punishment.

Myne walked through the parting crowds, largely oblivious to their frightened stares. At the end of the line, we encountered a modest booth made of cloth drapes. Even before we reached it, I could tell what it contained from the delicious smell. Just as I'd suspected when we first spied the long line, the church was providing food to the people of the slums.

The people in the booth only made and served one dish: soup, boiled in a huge pot filled with vegetables. The scent gave away the fact that the soup contained no meat. But in the depths of winter, and especially on particularly chilly days like this one, anyone would be grateful for a chance to warm their body—even if they could only do so through a humble bowl of vegetable soup. Proof of that need lay in the length of the line stretching out from the tent.

One thing still puzzled me: Where had such a run-down old church found the money to make and serve so much soup?

"I want a bowl," Myne said, staring at the cauldron.

"Well, you can't have one," I said, pushing Myne into the church. "That soup's not for us—it's for the less fortunate. Let's keep moving."

The church was far better maintained within than without. In particular, the statue of the god upon the altar was made of much finer materials than the church housing it. I cleared my throat as I looked at it, then called out to one of the praying nuns.

The nun's eyes widened when her gaze landed on the family crest on my armor. The names and symbols of all five esteemed families were well-known throughout these lands. "That family crest," the nun stammered. "You're a holy knight of the Barbatos family. But…what are you doing here?"

"My name is Fate Barbatos. I've come to ask for your assistance."

I gave her a quick rundown on the current state of Hausen and how we needed help rebuilding. Then I explained that I wanted the church's help finding people to assist us because I specifically wanted to recruit those who were considered forsaken. At first, my request confused the nun, but when I explained that we had full permission from the king, some of the tension bled out of her features. I couldn't help but be acutely aware that even if I used pleasant words like "assistance" and "help," my status meant the nun likely considered my request an order.

"Let me be clear," I said. "I won't force anyone to go to Hausen against their will. But if anyone who has nowhere else to go wants to start a new life, I hope you'll introduce them to me."

“Ah…I see. May I be so bold as to ask a few questions?” the nun asked apologetically.

I nodded.

“Will everyone who goes to your estate be properly fed? Will there be security on the way to the estate? Also—”

The nun had more than a few questions, and all of them concerned the workers’ basic welfare. From this, I came to understand that living conditions in the slums had only worsened since my departure. It seemed a major factor in the shift was simply that the knights of the Hart family were no longer around to protect the people who lived here. Not only had Lady Roxy’s father died in Galia, but his daughter had been sent there in his stead. Without the shield of the Hart family, the slums had become a playground where the other holy knights came to vent their frustrations without consequence.

Now I knew why so many holy knights had scowled when I requested permission to take charge of Seifort’s forsaken. They were infuriated by the thought that someone would dare to take their toys.

I wanted the nuns—and anyone overhearing us who had concerns—to understand the entirety of my plan, so I invited the nun I was speaking with to visit Barbatos Manor, and even Hausen, at her convenience. Ideally, she would be able to come and see our work for herself. We would never gain her trust through words alone. Real confidence would take hard work and clear results.

Just as we finished up our discussion, I realized Myne had vanished. I scanned the area and found her curled up asleep on one of the pews. Ah, of course. High-level adventurers like her took each and every opportunity to rest. Still, what had happened to the firm, strong glare she’d promised me? Regardless, I knew waking her up the wrong way would leave me with hell to pay, so I let it slide for the moment.

The nun looked upon Myne’s sleeping face and gave me a gentle smile. “She’s adorable, isn’t she?”

“When she’s asleep? Yes, I guess you could say that.” I sighed. “Sometimes I can’t help but wonder how much easier my life would be if she stayed asleep forever.”

“That’s a rather cruel thing to say, don’t you think?”

I laughed sheepishly. The nun was right. “It’s okay, I’m joking.”

I turned to the statue of the god upon the altar, and as I stared at it, I felt the nun’s gaze move past me to rest on the statue as well.

“Are you curious about our god, Laplace?”

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t heard that name in some time. I put my faith aside some time ago, but…standing here brings back memories. I think I’ll always carry a bit of it with me.”

“I see…” The nun frowned. “Please, just…remember that Laplace is the creator, the genesis of our world. I know you are a holy knight, so I hope you’ll refrain from saying such impious things in these halls.”

The faceless god towered over us in silence. The creator, Laplace. The one who had seen fit to bestow skills upon the people of this world. But Laplace's gifts were not distributed equally. There was a clear divide that separated the world into the chosen and the forsaken. Two separate sides of the world, and no way to change your fate besides death.

The nun looked at me as though she could sense the reasons I'd lost my faith. Then she said the same thing I'd heard so many times before: "When we gaze upon the unfortunate, we must remember that Laplace is testing their faith."

If that was at all true, what was I to the gods? Was the Gluttony hungering within me just another one of their tests?

Chapter 8:
The Shadow of the Vlericks

THE FOLLOWING DAY, under a clear sky and in beautiful weather, I finally began working in the garden. Rebuilding and remodeling the manor itself was well beyond my abilities, thus Aaron's quest to enlist a carpenter. But when it came to groundskeeping, I could put my experience as a servant of Hart Manor to good use. People probably thought it a little strange for the head of a holy knight family to do such work himself, but I enjoyed gardening.

I stood outside by myself, considering how to begin restoring the former beauty of the Barbatos Manor grounds. Parts of it were choked with massive tangles of weeds, and others had been mercilessly destroyed by Myne during our training sessions. This would be a tremendous job. Lost in thought, planning my strategy, I heard somebody calling out to me from the grounds adjacent to ours.

"My goodness! Fate, is that you?! It's been so long!"

The voice belonged to none other than one of the elderly gardeners who had watched over me as an apprentice. An enormous grin spread over his face. He was genuinely happy to see me again. But as he registered where I stood and the fancy clothes I wore, his jaw dropped. I'd expected this, at some point. I didn't wear my skull mask while at the manor, so one of our neighbors had been bound to notice eventually.

"Ah, long time no see," I said. "I hope you've been well."

"This is…this is unbelievable, Fate. You left so suddenly, and now you're back as a holy knight? It's unreal. Oh, speaking of—" He stopped to brush the dirt and dust from his clothes. "Where are my manners? This is no way to behave in front of someone of your rank."

"No, no, it's fine. I'm Fate Barbatos now, heir to the Barbatos family. But please, call me Fate, like always."

"Well, if you insist, and that's what you want. But I gotta tell you, everybody in Hart Manor was all abuzz when they learned old Lord Aaron was back! We heard he had an heir too—but nobody could have imagined that would be you! You must've been hiding one hell of a skill all this time!"

I wasn't sure I'd hidden anything, exactly. Back when I'd been a servant of the Hart family, I still hadn't had the Holy Sword Technique skill required of holy knights. I'd stolen the skill from Hado Vlerick by killing him. For better or for worse, that same skill had decided my destiny. The world really was unpredictable. You never knew what was waiting for you around the corner.

First, I'd been a penniless gatekeeper. Then, right when I thought I was doomed to be just another victim of the Vlericks' cruelty, Lady Roxy herself had saved me by taking me in as her servant. Then I'd gone off after

her to Galia as an adventurer, and now I was back in Seifort—not just as a holy knight, but as heir to the Blade of Light, Aaron Barbatos himself.

I chuckled at the sheer ridiculousness of it all. Meanwhile, the groundskeeper took a look at the Barbatos Manor grounds. “Fate, this place is a real mess,” he said. “Don’t tell me you intend to tackle it all by yourself?”

He’d probably gathered my intent from the gardening tools laid out around me. I nodded. “Yeah. I want to put all your teachings to good use and give it a go myself. And besides, I enjoy it. I find gardening calming. It’s, uh…going to take some time though, that’s for sure.”

“It’s a big job all right, but hey, how about it, Fate? You wanna let this old man help you out a little?”

“I…but…ah, is that okay? After all, you already have the Hart Manor gardens to maintain…”

The old man burst out laughing. “Don’t underestimate us veterans. And besides, I’m not the only one working on the gardens there. I’ll come help you out whenever I’ve got a little free time. How about that?”

I nodded. That sounded great.

“Well, no time like the present,” said the groundskeeper. “Let’s get started!”

“Wow, thank you!”

The old groundskeeper crossed over to the Barbatos Manor grounds. Once again, he surveyed the conditions. “I’ve seen this place who knows how many times from just across the way, but up close, it’s much worse than I thought. And what’s all this, then?”

“Uh…what’s all what, then?” I asked.

The old groundskeeper pointed to where great sections of the earth had been gouged, torn, and scarred—they *were* battle scars, essentially, from when Aaron and Myne had sparred just the day before.

Myne’s strength was unquestionable, but Aaron had also grown unbelievably powerful since we defeated the lich lord. I assumed the change had to do with his limit break in the aftermath of that battle. The phenomenon had allowed him to grow beyond his natural level cap. That limit break also meant that when Myne and Aaron sparred, the ground they fought on suffered more than either opponent. I couldn’t really get angry at them though, because sometimes I got in on the action as well. Then the ground suffered a third again as much…

“When you practice with the Blade of Light, even basic training ends up pretty destructive,” I said, rubbing the back of my head.

“But Fate! If you knights keep this up, at this rate, nothing will grow here for decades! The manor grounds will turn into a barren wasteland…”

As the groundskeeper and I puzzled over how to solve this problem, the two primary antagonists to our efforts sauntered out of the manor, weapons in hand. A common sight these days. It was all too easy to predict what was about to happen. They were going to spend the rest of the day

locked in battle because neither of them could ever get enough of a good fight.

Said fight kicked off right before our eyes, accompanied by the sharp sounds of a golden holy sword clashing against a black axe. In a matter of moments, the already-damaged grounds were once more shredded. The old groundskeeper looked on, wide-eyed. Then, silently, he turned and started heading back for Hart Manor.

"Wait! Please, wait!" I called after him. "Didn't you say you wanted to help me out?"

"Fate, my boy, let me be honest with you," he said wearily. "You're asking the impossible. We tidy any of that up, and those two will rip it all back to nothing in an afternoon. I bet they've made this place worse than it started!"

"Hold on, I have an idea. Please, just wait there a moment, would you?"

I unsheathed Greed and jumped into the fray, the black sword in hand. It felt a bit like stepping into the jaws of death: Myne and Aaron never held back against each other.

"I've been waiting for this day to come!" shouted Greed. "I've ached for it! It's time to take on Mr. Destructive and Little Miss Fury once and for all!"

"You make it sound easy…"

"You know what to do, Fate! Use my First Level secret technique. One shot! That's all we'll need!"

"Don't be an idiot! You know I can't do that! It'd blow away the entire manor!"

"What does it matter? This place is basically a ruin anyway. What better time to start fresh? You can rebuild from the ground up!"

Greed went on chattering to himself as I dove in to stop Myne and Aaron. As soon as they spotted me, the balance of the fight shifted—and it was suddenly me against both of them. I was stuck fending for my life for what must have been a whole fifteen minutes until the two hotheads finally cooled off and calmed down.

"What's up, Fate?" asked Myne. "If you wanted a sparring partner, you should have waited until Aaron and I were done."

"I didn't jump in because I wanted a partner…" I panted. "Sheesh, Myne. That last blow had way too much power. I thought I was going to die."

"That wasn't too much. Too much would have sent you into the sky. Want me to show you?"

I shook my head with a shudder.

Aaron laughed and slid his sword back into its sheath. "It's poor manners to intrude on someone else's duel, Fate. You do need to learn to wait your turn. Myne and I agreed to this time early this morning. Then again, this three-way bout was refreshing. Let's do it again!"

“Yeah, no, that’s not really what I was going for, guys. I…”

They’d enjoyed pairing up against me so much that they immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion. They thought I hadn’t wanted to be left out. It took me forever to explain the real reason: that if they kept fighting wherever they pleased, I wouldn’t be able to fix a single sprig of the manor gardens.

“I see, I see,” said Aaron. “In that case, we just have to choose a dedicated place for training. Is that right?”

“Exactly. So how about over on the western side? There’s a walled-up corner that would be perfect.”

“Hm. Fighting in an enclosed space…limited movement…an intriguing proposal! What do you think, Myne?”

“I’ll fight anywhere. I don’t care.”

“Then it’s decided! Let’s go!”

“Round two!”

Neither one was in the habit of mincing their words. They sped over to the western corner of the grounds and started up again without a second to spare. Dust clouds rose into the air with the clanging of their weapons. It seemed the change in location had only inspired them to go even harder.

With a relieved sigh, I slid Greed back into his scabbard and returned to the groundskeeper’s side. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Looks like I managed to save what was left.”

“Well, I tell you…you’ve certainly gotten braver since I last saw you. But you’re right. At least now I can actually give you a hand. But that western part of the grounds? That’s going to be a little pocket of Galia, I can tell you that.”

The groundskeeper had never been to Galia, but he’d heard stories. And after seeing Myne and Aaron locked in fierce battle over a scarred patch of earth? Yeah, I could see what he meant.

With his help, I worked on the gardens until sundown. We talked about where I might source soil and other supplies, as well as seedlings and the like, and he was kind enough to promise to introduce me to his own suppliers until I found my own.

“I don’t know how to thank you for all of this,” I said.

“No, no, it’s I who should be thanking you. It’s been a long time since I got to work on a big project like this! It’s all just maintenance back at Hart Manor. I’ll be back to help again, and I’ll pass the word on to the other gardeners.”

“Thank you!”

With the other Hart gardeners helping out, we’d be well and truly set. I walked the gardener back over to Hart Manor, and then I returned to my own to look over all our hard work and imagine how stunning the grounds would be when we were done. There’d be a grand fountain in the center, surrounded by healthy trees, under which I’d plant a variety of beautiful,

vibrant flowers. *It's going to be wonderful—just glorious when it becomes reality!*

I was shaken from my thoughts by the ongoing clamor of clashing steel upon steel coming from the west. Myne and Aaron were still fighting. Did their stamina know no bounds? Either way, I knew that if I went to investigate, I'd get pulled into their next round, so instead, I opted to head inside.

Only then did I notice a woman standing at our gates—the nun from the church in the slums. After she'd promised to support any forsaken citizens who wanted to go to Hausen, I'd given her a travel pass to allow her to enter the Holy Knight District as necessary. She had her own preparations to see to, which I knew would keep her busy, so I hadn't expected to see her so soon. Her appearance brought a smile to my face.

I walked over to the manor gates cheerfully, but as I approached, I realized the nun was deathly pale and trembling. "Please!" she cried. "You must help!"

"What is it? What's happened?"

Why was she so shaken? I hurriedly opened the gates and invited her inside the manor. Upon entering, she collapsed as if the last of her energy had left her. I caught her limp body, and it dawned on me that she had come here in such a rush that she could barely even stand.

The nun looked up into my eyes and her voice was weak. "I've committed a terrible, terrible sin. But I thought…I thought I was doing the right thing. I really did, but…"

As she slowly recovered and told the rest of her story, I came to understand just how the little church in the slums had been able to afford to feed the forsaken. The soup had been paid for by the Vlerick family, on the condition that they could periodically come by at any time and conscript some fifty or so forsaken for labor.

"Until now, there haven't been any problems with the arrangement. All the people who left for work returned eventually. But…this time, they wanted a hundred people. They were all supposed to be back already, but none of them returned…but for one. One person managed to escape, and when he told us what happened—he said he was the lone survivor. Everyone else was killed!"

The nun was at a loss. She didn't know what to do, but she'd seen our meeting as fateful, and so she'd run here to ask for my help. I did my best to calm her down before asking my next question.

"Where were they taken?"

"To the Military District. To a facility managed and run by the Vlerick family."

Well, then. I would just have to investigate this place myself.

Chapter 9:
The Military District of Seifort

I LEFT BARBATOS MANOR at midnight as the light of the moon rose to its peak. The Vlerick family would never let me into their facility through the front door, so I had to do things the way I had back when I was known as the adventurer Corpse: sneaking in under cover of night.

I could get to the Military District from the Holy Knight District, but as expected, guards were stationed at each gate. I needed to find another way in. I looked up at the high walls that marked the border between the two quarters.

"It's been a while since we've been out solo like this," said Greed. "Are you sure you didn't want to ask the old man and Myne along for support?"

"We'll be fine. I can handle this on my own."

Aaron wasn't suited to stealthy work, so I'd asked him to report the Vlericks' suspicious activity to the king. The nun had gone with him, but neither had returned by the time I left. Talks were probably still ongoing. Everyone in Seifort lived under the rule of the king. Nobody could get away with herding hundreds of people together and slaughtering them for personal gain without his say-so.

Myne had wanted to come with me, but I'd asked her to wait for Aaron at the manor. To be frank, she just wasn't any good at stealth. Her tactics began and ended with smashing through the front door and breaking everything on the other side. Plus, with her giant axe, we'd be spotted right away. Despite her obvious displeasure, I managed to convince her to stay behind, but she stuck by my side all the way to the manor gates as I left, glaring the whole time. I hoped that she'd be in a better mood by the time I returned.

"Well," I muttered, "let's get past this wall and see what things look like on the inside."

"Think you can climb it quietly?"

"Just you watch. I've had a lot of time to get used to the Domain of E!" I kicked gently off the ground and sprang skillfully up the face of the wall, landing at the top of it with a delicate footfall no louder than a whisper. "How about that?"

"Eh, sixty points out of a hundred," said Greed. "I could feel my sheath shaking as you landed. You've got work to do."

"That's more than good enough. You're the absolute pickiest critic. Impossible to satisfy!"

"I expect nothing less than perfection from the wielder of the mighty black sword Greed! By the way, look down."

Whoa, I thought. That's really cool.

Buildings towered neatly side by side as far as I could see. All of them glowed with an enchanting light. It was significantly brighter here than in any other district at night. I realized then that I'd never seen past the Military District's thick walls before—so I'd never known the buildings there looked nothing like anything else in Seifort. The vast majority of structures in the Merchant, Residential, and Holy Knight Districts were constructed from red brick. But here, not only were none of the buildings made of brick; none of them had windows either. They were vast structures composed of what looked to be seamless walls that pulsed gently with constant light. In fact, these walls were what illuminated the district.

"What…are these buildings?" I asked.

"That, my friend, is Galian tech. They're special plates that draw in energy from the atmosphere. The energy is then used to power everything inside the building."

"So the Military District has access to Galian tech, then…"

The empire of Galia had fallen a long, long time ago. Most of their technology was lost, so I'd never imagined I would find it on the other side of a plain wall separating city districts.

"Well, even if the civilization is dead, that doesn't mean they took everything with them to the afterlife," said Greed. "Their home is still chock-full of their old technology. You saw it yourself. I imagine all this was brought straight here from Galia."

"In that sense, Galia is a kind of treasure trove, isn't it?"

"That's why Envy left the Divine Dragon to do its work and did their own business from the shadows. I'm sure it had reasons for doing so outside of controlling the monster population."

When I'd killed the Divine Dragon, I had carved a monumental scar into the land itself. That ravine now separated Galia from Babylon, the city at its border. The monster population could grow all it wanted, but very few would ever make it past that ravine. I'd taken other protective measures too, so I didn't think the monsters of Galia would be much of a problem going forward.

I frowned. "But if people started going to Galia to look for more of these relics…then what Seifort does here could be done elsewhere too."

"I doubt the kingdom wants that. I suspect they'd prefer having a monopoly over Galian tech."

"That would explain why they've gone to such great lengths to hide it behind these walls."

But now that the roads to Galia were more open, there would be no end to the people searching for old, lost technology. And Hausen was positioned to be at the front line of that forthcoming progress. While the Barbatos estate was still undergoing reconstruction, it was relatively close to the Galian border. It excited me to think of all the tech that might one day fill our city. However, I put my dreams aside to focus on the Vlericks.

"I can't see the Vlerick facility from here," I muttered.

“According to the nun, their facility should be north of this location.”

“She also said we’d recognize it as soon as we saw it…”

The Vlericks were one of the five esteemed families, and they ranked high among the other holy knights. According to the nun, their research facility was both considerably larger than the others and adorned with their family crest. She’d heard this from the lone survivor, who had little reason to lie.

“Well, let’s head north, shall we?”

“Don’t go getting spotted, Fate. We’re here on reconnaissance only. No matter what happens, don’t get involved.”

“Why so worried all of a sudden?”

“As far back as I can recall, nothing good has ever come of humans mixing with Galian technology.”

It was unlike Greed to speak with such gravity. Concerning too. Nevertheless, I looked down from the top of the wall to make sure nobody was around, then jumped. The moment I hit the ground, I rolled to soften the impact and moved on silently.

The paths I ran were like the buildings around them, made of something I’d never seen that pulsed with a dull light. At least that made it easy to navigate at night. Together with the illuminated buildings, I didn’t need to use my Night Vision skill at all.

I slipped silently around the patrolling guards and headed farther north. Eventually, I came across a curious clump of steel surrounded by a group of people. Some were soldiers, but another group of ten or so were dressed in white lab coats. They stared in fascination at the steel object, which had two wheels positioned linearly, as well as a seat between them for a person to sit on. The object’s narrow frame made it seem like it would fall to either side at the slightest push, yet somehow it stayed upright and maintained its balance.

“What *is* that thing?” I asked, peering from a distance.

“It’s a two-wheeled vehicle known as a motorbike. The people of Galia once rode them to get around. Those researchers must have found one in Galia and repaired it here.”

“A vehicle? Are you telling me you can ride that thing? It’s just chunks of metal, though.”

“Yeah, I know what you’re thinking. But that ‘thing’ you’re looking at is a hundred times faster than any horse. Doesn’t get tired either.”

I frowned at the object. The “motorbike.” I just couldn’t believe such a thing could be faster than a horse. But I could see how it wouldn’t get tired: it wasn’t alive. “How do you ride it?”

“You see those handles attached to the section near the front wheel? That’s how you control it. It has built-in balance control, meaning even beginners can ride it without fear of falling over.”

“So why aren’t any of those guys riding it?”

Greed chuckled. “Because none of them have the necessary magic level to do it. The bike is fueled by arcane energy. If any of them even sat in the seat, they’d find themselves on a one-way trip to hell.”

As I got a little closer, I noticed three men lying on the ground by the bike. Their eyes were rolled back in their heads, and white froth bubbled from their mouths. They were the very embodiment of Greed’s warning.

“Could *I* ride it?”

“Of course you could. You’re in the Domain of E. You could ride it for as long as you wanted and you’d never end up like those guys. But that’s not why we’re here tonight.”

He was right. But the Military District was proving to be a world full of the unknown with an abundance of distractions.

“Yeah, I know.” I sighed. “Let’s keep moving, then.”

I held back the urge to explore and pushed myself ever northward.

Chapter 10:
Research Facility No. 7

I SNUCK AROUND MORE guard patrols, and eventually, a large research facility came into view. Emblazoned upon its wall was the Vlerick family crest. I carefully studied the place as I crept closer.

Just as expected, security is tight… Of course they'd have strengthened their security detail—one of their forsaken prisoners had just escaped.

As I surveyed from the shadows, Greed spoke. "Well, what now? It'll be no mean feat to get past all these guards."

"Well, it won't be easy if we try to get in through the front door, that's for sure. Let's do what we did to get into the Military District."

"Oh, you mean we'll bunny-hop our way inside? Or do you call it the frog jump? I forget."

"How about staying quiet?"

Greed's mediocre punchlines could only break my focus, and I needed to be sharp if I wanted to sneak inside without being seen. I slipped from the shadows to a blind spot in the security patrol, and without losing any momentum, I leaped up the wall. It wasn't nearly as tall as the walls surrounding the Military District, making the job much easier.

As I bounded up, I noted the pristine smoothness of the facility walls. Not a scratch to be seen, and no seams or signs that the metal had been constructed of interconnected plates or bricks. Greed was right. The military understood exactly how to use this lost technology. Light pulsed gently from the walls as they reacted with the atmosphere.

Something about it was somehow…familiar.

I landed on the roof without a sound. "Here we are."

"No guards up here."

"Funny, it's like an ant nest down below."

The wind on the roof blew fiercely, probably due to the ventilation shafts expelling the heat produced inside the facility—which made that fierce wind *hot*. No matter that winter reigned everywhere else in Seifort, up on that roof, it was summer. Sweat beaded my brow.

"Greed, what's that massive thing over there making the wind blow like that?"

"It's just a propeller. It's connected to a machine that makes it spin. Basic tech, but lost all the same."

Greed called it a rudimentary mechanism, but it didn't look like that to me at all. How on earth did it spin without manpower? I couldn't understand it, but it didn't matter; that propeller would get me inside.

"We'll drop in through there."

Greed cackled. "This should be fun."

I cut through the wire mesh that covered the ventilation shaft, making a space just large enough for a person to get through. Now I just had to gauge the timing of that massive propeller and drop between its swinging blades. After that, I'd need to engage Night Vision to navigate through the darkness of the vents.

"It's harder than it looks, Fate," Greed warned. "Being as strong as you are now, the propeller won't mess you up if you hit it—but you'll mess up the propeller. And if that happens…"

"Then our stealth mission loses all its stealth."

"Good, you get it. All that's left is to sit back and watch you take care of it."

"Isn't that what you do all the time?"

"What else do you expect? I'm a weapon!"

Greed's cackle was all the signal I needed, so I dropped through the vent and gripped the edge as I hung inside. The roar of the propeller deafened me, and the force of the wind made me feel like I might float. I studied the rotations closely, until—

"Now!"

I kicked off the vent wall and flew downward headfirst. One arm of the propeller brushed the top of my head as I passed between the blades, and the other arm slid across the bottom of my feet after my body cleared.

Whew, that was close—but not nearly as hard as having to dodge Myne's axe!

Once I escaped the propeller, the wind died and I picked up speed. *Time to see where this vent goes*.

According to the nun, the forsaken brought to the facility were taken underground. In other words, I had to head for the basement. Whatever was going on down there…I needed to see what the Vlericks had done for myself.

"The farther we fall, the more mesh openings there are," I said. "But I think it's this way."

"It's a big facility. It's not odd that the ventilation system is a mess. Make sure you pick somewhere spacious to land, or we could be here all night trying to find the basement."

"Yeah, yeah…"

I did as Greed said and found a large opening to continue our fall toward the basement. As we dropped, a scent caught my nose and enveloped me. It smelled…raw. Fleshy. I didn't like it at all.

"It's the stench of death," I muttered.

"Get ready to land, Fate."

I landed on more mesh at the bottom of the ventilation shaft, where air from inside the facility made its way out. Below me stretched an enormous room, the floor of which I couldn't see. Instead, a pool of water spread out below, over which lay a few foot bridges for people to pass over.

The water was stained red. It brought to mind fresh blood. I cut through the mesh with Greed and dropped into the room.

"Well, this is creepy."

"Yeah…"

"What's wrong? You don't sound like yourself."

"Hm… What are you worrying about me for, anyway? Don't you have something to investigate?"

He was obviously dodging the question, but all the same, I headed toward what looked like the exit. It was a door that resembled nothing I'd ever seen before. It had no doorknob or handle, and it didn't open when I pushed it.

As I puzzled over how to open it, Greed interrupted. "It's an automatic door. See that panel by the side? Anyone who has permission to be in this area can touch it to open and close the door."

"Seriously? But I'm the complete opposite of that, which means I won't be able to open it at all. And breaking it down is kind of out of the question at this point…"

But if I couldn't open or break through, what next? We were at a dead end.

"Try holding my blade against the plate," said Greed with a chuckle.

"What? But why?"

"Just do it already."

His voice was full of confidence, so I did as he said. The door slid open.

"It opened! We're in!"

"How's that for service? Stick with me and life will be a breeze, Fate."

If Greed had the right of it, and the door only let you through if you had permission, then that meant Greed *was* permission—or he could bypass the entire thing somehow. This sword could at times prove useful outside of battle, it seemed.

"The door's internal structure is much simpler than my own," said Greed, "so if we find any other automatic doors, I'll get us through those as well."

"Wow, it's downright uncanny that you're so useful today."

"What do you mean today? Take that back this instant! I'm always useful!"

I peeked out past the doorway to check if anybody was on the other side, but it was eerily quiet. "Let's keep moving."

"Hey, we're not finished. I said take that back!"

"Okay, okay, you're always useful, all right? All the time. I'd be lost without you."

"Ha! You're damn right. And don't forget it!"

I crept forward into a passageway brilliantly illuminated by lights in the ceiling. Not candlelight either—I couldn't have told you the source. The materials that made the walls and floor were similarly unidentifiable. If they

were metal or rock, I'd never seen their like before. Everything about this place, from the propellers to the automatic doors to the very surface on which I walked, made it utterly alien to me. It felt almost like I'd passed into another dimension.

"Hey, Greed," I muttered. "You said the technology in this place is all Galian?"

"Yep. But this is just the tip of the iceberg."

"Only the tip? You mean there's more? Galian technology really must be something else. How in the world does a civilization with this kind of power go extinct? I don't get it."

"They went too far. They threw their ethics aside and went past the point of no return. That might not even be the worst of it either…"

Having said his part, Greed dropped into silence. I walked on through the passageways quietly, and Greed opened each automatic door we found without so much as a word. Then, as the next passage turned a corner, I felt the presence of humans and stopped in place.

I peeked carefully around the corner and spied a group of men in guard uniforms pushing a huge metal box on a trolley down the hall. They shoved it through an automatic door and out of sight. Whatever lay in that box, it was so heavy that it took all five guards to move it. Once sure that nobody else was in sight, I slipped into the room they'd just left. In there, I found more large boxes—so many that they nearly filled the room.

I drew close to study one. The lip around the lid was smeared with a rusty, sticky fluid.

"This…no way," I whispered, my mind filling with an image I couldn't ignore. "No, they wouldn't…" I moved my hand toward the lid of the box.

"Don't do it, Fate—stop!"

I pried the lid off anyway. I'd seen five men transporting one of these horrors as if they were performing a mundane household chore. I wanted to believe the boxes couldn't possibly contain what I had imagined. I wanted to believe it, but…

"Greed, this…how is this possible…?" With shaking hands, I set the lid back down on the box's stained rim.

Chapter 11:
The Imprisoned Holy Knight

"FATE! Come back to me! Fate!"

Greed's voice brought me back to my senses just as I heard footsteps approaching the storage room. I quickly turned and took cover in the shadows, and just in time. A group of men entered the room—the same five guards I'd seen minutes ago.

I'd been lost in my thoughts longer than I could afford. The contents of that box were burned into my mind's eye. They sickened me. How could anyone do something so inhumane? And how could these men so casually transport these boxes? Each one was crammed full of charnel—brutally cleaved body parts, flesh, blood, and broken corpses.

What were the Vlericks doing in this hellhole?!

"Fate, calm yourself. Your heartbeat is erratic. That's why I told you not to look!"

"I'm sorry. But I—I don't regret it. I had to see it for myself. Now I know they're up to something truly awful down here."

"Yeah, but you probably won't feel like eating meat for a while after that sight, huh?"

"Why…why would you even say that?!"

"Come on. Let's move, Fate."

I steadied my breath and looked around the room, more in control. The guards had transported all the boxes out of it by now, which left me with two choices: Follow them and see where they went, or hope that a different route would yield better results.

"Based on what we saw, I'd say those boxes were stuffed full so they could be disposed of. If you follow those men, you're likely going to see even worse than that."

"Even worse?!"

"Fate, stop! Fate!"

I ran through the door and down the passageway that the guardsmen had disappeared into. I found them in the next room. There, the men emptied the contents of a box into a pit set into the metal floor. Unnerving sounds rose from within the pit. Inhuman, monstrous growls. Were the Vlericks keeping monsters here, *inside* the city of Seifort? It seemed these guards didn't care either way. I listened as they talked among themselves.

"Eat up! Get your fill!" one guard called into the pit.

Another grimaced. "Ugh. You know…I'm never going to get used to seeing this."

"You two!" a third barked. He seemed like their supervisor. "Don't get too close or you'll fall in! If that happens, you're dessert!"

The first chuckled. "Yeah, yeah, I've heard that before. You know, it makes a kind of sense. At least this way all those good-for-nothing forsaken

finally become good for something. I mean, it's kind of disgusting, but still…"

"You can't argue with the pay, am I right? Once you get used to it, the work's not a big deal. Anyway, it's their own damn fault they ended up monster chow. Pathetic, being so broke, you sign up for any weird task."

I couldn't believe how callously these guardsmen spoke. I leaped out of hiding. In two steps, I'd reached the workers, and I shoved the first one into the pit. He fell, screaming.

"I guess that isn't a big deal either, then?" I spat.

The remaining four guards jumped back, scrambling for their batons.

"Who the hell are you?" the supervisor cried. "Do you even know whose facility this is?"

"Oh, I know, all right."

Before any of the guards had a chance to strike me with their batons, I spun and knocked the three closest ones into the pit below to join their friend. With them taken care of, I strode over to the last remaining man. I grabbed him by the throat, lifting him off the ground as I stared down at the four men below us.

The pit was quite deep, but the four guards still lived. They huddled in a group at the bottom and shivered with fear. The source of their terror surrounded them—strange, humanoid monsters each sporting a metal collar. The monsters were too busy feasting on the corpse scraps they'd been fed to notice the new arrivals. But they'd finish that food eventually, and then they'd look up to find the next course waiting for them.

"Look, we're sorry, okay?" one of the guards called up, panic clear in his voice. "Just please, push the emergency button over there, would you?"

"Please! We're begging you! They'll eat us!" the others cried.

I looked over to where they pointed. A red button was set into the wall. The red paint had largely rubbed off, revealing the silver metal behind it. For a so-called "emergency" button, it looked like it had been used a lot. Did people fall into the pit regularly?

"I think that button is connected to the collars attached to the monsters' necks," said Greed. "Push that button, and you'll send a searing electric shock down their spines."

"So the reason this button is so well-used is…"

"Because the guards abuse the monsters. They enjoy it, I'd wager."

"This whole place disgusts me."

I left the button untouched and merely watched events unfold. With the corpses of the forsaken chewed down to the bone, the strange monsters turned toward the guards. Their long tongues dangled from their fanged mouths as, slowly, they moved in closer.

"Please! Have a heart! Push the goddamn button!"

"I can't do this! I can't do this!" one man shouted, then screamed. "Stop it! Get away from me!"

"No! Not like this! Not like this!"

The monsters didn't kill the men with any particular speed. They bashed the workers around, crushing their bones into the floor, relishing the pain. It was almost as though they were channeling their own abuse, giving back the agonies inflicted upon them. These monsters were much, much smarter than they appeared.

While the echoes of the guards' dying screams rang in our ears, I began my interrogation of their supervisor. "What goes on in this place? Answer me!"

"I can't…I can't! If I say anything, I'll be…"

He didn't finish the sentence, but I knew how it ended. Anyone who revealed the Vlerick family's secrets would not be allowed to live. But I would make him talk. He was the only source of information I had.

I now knew for certain that the Vlericks were raising monsters here, and I'd learned that those monsters fed on human flesh. But why? What *were* those strange beasts? I'd never seen anything like them, not in Seifort, and not even in Galia. I held the last guard over the pit so he could see down to the bottom. As soon as I released my grip, he'd join his friends as part of the feast.

"Okay!" the man cried. "I'll talk. I'll talk, I swear. Just please, don't drop me."

"Then you can start by telling me who gives the orders in this place."

"Lord Rafale Vlerick. I don't know any more than that, I swear. My job is just taking the boxes when they're full and feeding the corpses to the monsters. That's it."

"What do you know about the monsters down there?"

"Almost nothing! But, they're…they were goblins, once. When we fed them all those humans, they…they changed. I don't know why. I don't know anything else."

I loosened my grip on the guard's neck ever so slightly. My message was clear: *If we're done here, then I'm done with you*.

The guard scrabbled at my arm, desperate to avoid the fall. "Wait! Listen! There's more! Lady Memil Vlerick's in here, but she's locked up. Confined. If you talk to her, she's sure to know more!"

"What? Why would Memil be locked up?"

Memil was Rafale's sister. What reason could he have to keep her confined? And if she *was* imprisoned, why was she kept in a place as disgusting as this? The guard didn't know. All he could say was what he'd heard from a woman who also worked in this place.

"Your story stinks of falsehoods," I said. "If you know that much, you'll know where she's being held. Where is Memil?"

"North of here, in one of the containment cells. I've never seen them myself. I've never even been over there, so I can't give you more details. Please! You have to believe me!"

I released my grip. The guard's face paled with fright as he plummeted into the monster pit full of those deformed, ravenous goblins.

His body slammed into the floor. Twisted and broken on the ground, he called up to me through gasping breaths.

"Why?! Why would you…I told you everything I know! Everything!"

"I'm leaving now—to verify what you told me. If it checks out, I'll come back and help you."

"But you'll never make it back in time!"

"That's your problem. I'm sure you'll last longer than those money-hungry, good-for-nothing forsaken you throw down here."

I turned my back to him, heading north in search of the containment cells. As I left, I heard the despairing screams of the guard and the visceral roars of the monsters as they devoured him.

There was no delicate way to put it. Unspeakable sins were committed in this place. Truly immoral acts. I'd known Rafale was vile, but I still found it hard to imagine any person willing to go so far. And why was his own sister imprisoned here? As far as I knew, if Rafale showed kindness to anyone at all, it was to his own family. I didn't know what to believe anymore.

"Have you noticed?" asked Greed, cutting into my thoughts. "Those men made one hell of a racket, but not a single person came to check on them."

"Yeah, I noticed. I kept expecting guards to appear while I interrogated that last one. But there's nobody here. It's too quiet. If Memil really is down this way, we might learn why."

"This feeling reminds me of…past experiences. Be careful, Fate."

The black sword's words fell on my mind with unusual weight. I needed to be on my highest guard.

The basement of the facility was a cold, unfeeling place. The empty halls contained no traces of human life. No comfort, no warmth. Instead, the passageways echoed with the howls of bloodthirsty monsters that hungered, hungered, hungered.

Chapter 12:
Experiment E002

I PROCEEDED NORTH toward the containment cells, and little by little, a deep chill crept into my body. The air was cold, yes, but more than that, I shivered at the claw marks carved into the white walls that I passed and the multitude of bloodstains that accompanied them. The farther I went, the more signs of butchery I stumbled across. The scars and the blood told stories of countless lives lost to these depths. I was afraid that the forsaken who had come here from the church had been hunted down and killed in these very passageways.

Was that how they had died before their shredded corpses were fed to those monsters?

"Fate, are you all right?" asked Greed.

"Why? What's wrong? We should focus on finding Memil."

"If it's just my imagination, I'll let it slide, but…you're not acting like yourself. This isn't the Fate I know."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to tell you one thing, and I want you to listen well: do not respond to evil in kind."

"But those guards back there, they—"

"I know how they made you feel. I know you lost your cool. Even then, you can't afford to lose yourself like that. This is for your own sake. Power alone does not determine what is good and what is evil. Now more than ever, because you wield great power yourself, you must understand this."

"Greed, I…"

"Just think back. Do it now. Remember how you felt in Galia when you fought the Divine Dragon. Do you intend to repeat the past? When you meet Lady Roxy again, can you look her in the eyes and be proud of who you've become?"

I had gone to Galia to support Lady Roxy. I'd told myself I wanted to be a power she could rely on. But those words had merely been an excuse to fight, and Lady Roxy had discovered my hidden identity at the worst possible time. Even then, just as I was about to completely lose control of my Gluttony, she had reached out her hand to save me.

The emotion I felt from Lady Roxy in that moment could not be defined by ideas like "good" and "evil"—it was something warmer. She reached out with a power beyond levels, skills, and stats. At that moment, I realized that I hadn't journeyed to Galia to save Lady Roxy. I had gone so she could save me.

But I still had a long way to go. I'd decided to start over, doing my best so that I could look Lady Roxy in the eyes as a stronger, better person. However, I'd again lost myself to my anger and instincts. In doing so, I'd lost sight of what was most important. It was pitiful, really.

Aaron and Myne worried about me just like Greed did. They'd worried about me ever since I became a holy knight. These days, I felt like I had so much to do that I put those priorities first, and in my rush, I was making rash decisions in order to find the quickest, most efficient way to get what I wanted.

"I see it, now. Greed…I'm sorry."

"As long as you understand, Fate. I won't say more."

"Don't worry. You won't need to."

Greed was right. I wouldn't be able to change, let alone evolve, if I continued to fight evil with evil. Lady Roxy…she didn't see good and evil in such uncomplicated terms. Though I couldn't solve problems like she did, I could still find a way forward all my own. Maybe then, once I freed myself of the cursed binds that linked me to the Vlericks, I might finally be able to look her in the eyes.

I clasped Greed tight in hand and hurried on to the containment cells. There I found another plate next to a door that was much bigger than any I'd seen so far. Perhaps large numbers of people needed to be able to move through it at speed.

"Greed, can you open this door?"

"Of course."

I placed the black sword against the plate and the door opened with a beep. Once through, we stepped into a long passage lined with transparent doors on either side. These allowed for a full view of the rooms behind them, each of which was pure white and run through with drainpipes. They didn't look like places where people could live.

I checked each room to see if anybody else had been captured and contained, but to a one, the rooms were eerily clean and empty.

"There's nobody here."

"Don't give up yet. Check that door at the end of the corridor. It looks different."

The room at the end had a door made from a single pane of opaque glass. I couldn't see through to the room behind it. As the other rooms were unoccupied, if Memil was here, that was the only room where she could be. I put the black sword against the plate by the door.

"It opened. There's somebody in here. Is that Memil?"

"Yeah, that's her. I'd recognize that purple hair anywhere."

The girl looked haggard and gaunt, but there was no mistaking her. We were looking at Memil Vlerick. She was dressed in white, and her room contained only the soft bed on which she slept. She must have been utterly exhausted because she showed no sign of waking as I entered. Even when I walked up and touched her face, she continued to sleep. Something very strange was going on.

"What is this?" I asked aloud.

"Something is keeping her sedated and asleep… Fate, look. Her right arm."

“What the…”

Her arm was riddled with tiny wounds, as though she’d been stabbed countless times by a thin needle. The area around those wounds was a blend of her pale white skin and the deep blue of her veins.

“It looks like they injected her with some kind of drug, and a lot of it. That’s probably why she isn’t waking up.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Could be for an experiment of some kind. Just to be certain, use Identify on her.”

If they were experimenting on her, dosing her with something, we might see some sign of it in her stats. I focused on Memil and used my Identify skill.

Memil Vlerick, Lv 30
Vitality: 5,165,600
Strength: 6,197,600
Magic: 6,138,400
Spirit: 5,150,900
Agility: 5,167,800
Skills: Holy Sword Technique, Strength Boost (high), Magic Boost (high)

Memil’s stats were unusually high. Given her current skills and level, ordinarily her stats would still be in the lower six digits. But for some reason, each stat surpassed five million. This wild change was likely the result of the experiments that Greed had hypothesized. Despite all that strength, she had been left here, asleep.

“We’ll never find out what’s going on while she’s stuck like this,” I said.

“So what are you going to do?”

“We have to get her out of here. Based on those wounds in her arm, I’d guess it’s those injections that are keeping her like this. If those injections stop, maybe she’ll wake up, and then we can talk to her.”

She was undoubtedly an important source of information, so I reached out and hefted her over my shoulder. Just as I did, the room went from white to red, and a shrill alarm rang throughout the facility.

“What?!”

“You messed up, Fate. I told you to be careful.”

“What?! Don’t act like you aren’t a part of this!”

“May I remind you that I am merely a weapon, Fate?”

“Always shirking responsibility. You never change, do you?”

I turned toward the door only to see it shut on its own. I carried Memil over to it and placed Greed against the plate next to it.

“Greed, the door’s not opening.”

“Of course it’s not. A trespasser entered the room, so the security lock engaged.”

“If our cover’s been blown, then I guess the time for sneaking around is over, huh?”

“It’s what I’ve been waiting for, Fate. This creeping around in the shadows, it’s just not very…the mighty sword Greed, you know? Loud and violent, though? That’s what I’m talking about!”

With the cackling black sword raised up high, I sliced through the automatic door that stood in my way.

Chapter 13:
The Past, Resurrected

THE HALLWAY OUTSIDE the room pulsed an angry red. The sirens continued to wail, likely howling throughout the whole facility. Even then, I saw no evidence of any guards running to investigate. The hairs on my arm stood on end. I had a very, very bad feeling about this.

With Memil over my shoulder, I left the containment cell and ran into what lay in wait for me. Not humans, and not monsters, but the deformed creatures that had once been goblins. These beasts had been transformed through horrific experimentation, just like the ones I'd seen in the pit earlier.

Fifty of these hideous creatures crowded the passageway. They were the reason no guards had come despite the alarm. Nobody intended to capture me alive. Instead, by giving me up to these beasts, they could ensure no identifiable part of their intruder ever left the facility. The alarm bell didn't summon guards to investigate, it warned staff to evacuate.

As the creatures crept closer, a strange sensation crawled through me. Unlike the black eyes of regular goblins, the eyes of these beasts were stained the color of fresh blood. Not the red of my starved state, nor the red of my Gluttony—it didn't make me freeze in place—but all the same, an uncomfortable pressure seethed from their crimson gazes.

I hadn't considered them any kind of threat while they were trapped in the pit, so I hadn't used Identify, but now it was time to better understand my enemy.

"Huh?!" I backed up a step. Identify didn't work. At first, I assumed these goblins somehow carried the Conceal skill, but…even if they did, I should have been able to see their stats. *What's going on? This is like when I tried to use Identify on Myne…*

But I didn't have time to solve this mystery, because the monsters were fast approaching. Their teeth were misshapen and deformed, and they bared their dog-like fangs as they leaped toward me.

"Ugh!"

I cut the creatures down before they reached me. But instead of the metallic voice that spoke whenever my Gluttony ate the soul of my enemies, a different, sinking feeling filled my gut. Suddenly, I was assaulted by a searing pain, as if my body were being torn apart from the inside. This wasn't my Gluttony, nor was it my starvation. I had consumed poison. I coughed, spitting blood on the ground.

"What the hell is this?! It's making me sick."

The blood on the black sword turned to steam and evaporated into the air, leaving no trace of the violence I had committed with it.

"Fate, you must not kill these monsters," said Greed. "I didn't want to believe it at first but…I've seen their blood evaporate, and now I'm seeing

the effect they have on you. It's worse than I thought. These are nightwalkers."

"Nightwalkers? I thought they were goblins!"

The monsters didn't give me stats and they didn't give me skills. Instead, they poisoned me from the inside, racking me with pain. I used the face of the sword to beat them back as I cleared some space.

"Why doesn't Gluttony work on them?"

"Because they died a long time ago. What's left of their soul is rotten, but it keeps them moving. Eating decayed souls will only hurt you, Fate, so you can't kill them. Eat too many of their souls, and you'll die."

Even the goblin variety of nightwalkers were proving to be a formidable foe. They turned my strength into my weakness. I'd never fought anything I couldn't simply kill and devour.

"So I'm up against an enemy I can't kill."

What really unsettled me were the nightwalkers' apparent healing abilities. They regenerated unbelievably fast. Almost as soon as I broke their bones with the flat of the black sword, the bones cracked back into place as if nothing had happened.

"Yeah. There's one more thing you have to know. Under no circumstances can you let one of the nightwalkers bite you. The curse inside them can break through even the Domain of E. If any of them get you, you'll turn into one of 'em."

"What?! Give me a break!"

Then I saw that at the very back of the rows of nightwalkers were the guards I had pushed into the pit earlier. Every one of them now had a mouth filled with fangs and eyes stained a deep red. They too crept ever closer, and I saw in their eyes that when they had lost their humanity, they had not lost their hatred for me. They pushed through the crowd of monsters, coming straight at me.

"These freaking things are hard to handle," I grunted as I beat them back.

They kept growing in number too. More kept coming. It seemed the pit I'd seen earlier wasn't the only place these creatures were being kept. Did I need to find out where they were being released from?

I transformed Greed into the black shield to defend myself from the incoming nightwalkers, then shoved through the crowd. I ran until I spotted a dark room, and when my Night Vision confirmed it was empty, I ducked inside to take cover.

"Fate! Cut down the ceiling above the entrance to block the way in."

"Already on it." I leaped into the air. A few slices with my blade brought debris crumbling from the ceiling, creating a barrier the nightwalkers couldn't pass. I heard them on the other side, clawing at the debris in an effort to get to me, but they wouldn't get through any time soon.

I gently laid Memil on the ground and surveyed the room. By the look of things, it was another room used to raise the nightwalkers. Fortunately, based on the lack of scratches or blood on the floor and walls, I gathered that it hadn't been used recently. As the alarm continued to ring, I tried to figure out how to escape this research facility.

"That might be the way to go," I said, looking up.

"The ventilation shaft?"

"Yeah. It's probably our best bet for getting Memil out of here safely."

I hefted the still unconscious Memil back onto my shoulder. Just as I was about to head up the shaft, I noticed light leaking from a gap in the wall. What was that? I hadn't yet seen any seams in this building's structure, but now light peeked from between what appeared to be two sections of wall. Was that possible? I approached curiously just as Greed made a sound like he was clicking his tongue.

"I see," the black sword said. "A hidden room. Something caused a shift in the room that bent the wall slightly out of shape. That's why you can see the light on the other side. What do you wanna do, Fate?"

Memil was still asleep, and it didn't seem like she'd regain consciousness any time soon. I had to get her to safety, but I'd come to uncover what the Vlericks were up to. If I'd stumbled on a hidden room…it likely contained more secrets that the Vlericks didn't want found.

"Let's check it out."

"I knew you'd say that."

I cut open the wall with the black sword and stepped into the room.

The scene before my eyes was, yet again, one I could never have imagined. The room stretched out about a hundred feet to the back wall from where I stood. I heard a propeller whirring distantly through the dimly lit space. The room housed huge glass cylinders filled with the clear red liquid I'd seen earlier. Creatures were submerged in these tubes, suspended in the liquid—ordinary animals like cats and dogs, but also monsters. The room was filled with row after row of them.

"Are they doing experiments on these too?"

"By the look of it, yes. I bet it has something to do with those nightwalkers. The liquid in those cylinders is diluted blood. It's probably the source of the nightwalkers' curse."

"What do you mean by source?"

"Nightwalkers are derived from a Galian biological weapon. In short, the weapon carries an affliction. If a creature infected with it bites you, you also become a nightwalker. The Vlericks must have acquired one somehow. Of all the things they could've gotten hold of for their experiments, it had to be this. Did they think they could control the curse? Unbelievable."

"It's like a contagious disease, then? It spreads quick, and these nightwalkers are naturally inclined to grow their numbers. …If they escaped this place and got out into Seifort, we'd never be able to stop them."

"Exactly."

I moved deeper into the room. I hoped we might discover this "source." Instead, the contents of the last glass cylinder jolted me to my core. Inside of it hung the body of a man I knew all too well. "That's impossible—is that…Hado Vlerick?!"

The cylinder contained the very holy knight I had killed before leaving for Galia, floating, asleep. In our battle, I'd severed his right leg and both of his arms, yet the Hado unconscious before me had a fully intact body. Somehow, they'd grown back.

I moved up to take a closer look, and Hado's eyes shot open. His blood-red irises locked on mine, and the glass cylinder began to fracture. I'd been careless. I'd assumed everything in the cylinders was in the same deep sleep as Memil, and now I would pay for my arrogance.

I leaped backward to put space between us just as the cylinder shattered, spilling torrents of the clear red liquid over the floor. Hado had the same crazed look as the other nightwalkers. This wasn't the man I'd fought. This creature had lost all semblance of rational thought.

Regardless, the sheer loathing in his eyes as he stalked toward me was entirely genuine. He glared at me through a haze of hatred, and his mouth moved clumsily as he roared. "F…ate…Fate…! *Faaaaaaate*!"

Chapter 14:
The Rising Undead

I FACED DOWN the holy knight-turned-nightwalker. He was even stronger than I could have imagined. Hado instantly pounced into range. Because I still had Memil over one shoulder, I couldn't move freely. I could tell by the gleam in Hado's eyes that he had noticed this setback. His knuckles scraped the floor before his punch flew through the air, catching me in the stomach.

My mind throbbed gray from the impact and my grip on Memil loosened. She fell limply to the ground. I was sent careening back through the air, breaking through the ceiling of the hidden room and the walls of a dozen rooms above. By the time my consciousness started to clarify, I'd just passed through the outer wall of the facility itself. I could barely comprehend his sheer strength.

"He's in the Domain of E," said Greed.

"That son of a bitch," I muttered as I fell from the sky.

"Don't act so shocked. I told you before, didn't I? The Domain of E is a place beyond humanity, and you're only standing at the entrance of it."

I'd only made it to the entrance that Greed spoke of because of Gluttony, but it seemed there were other ways to get there. The two white knights who guarded the king of Seifort were also in the Domain of E. I could imagine how they'd made it there, but I couldn't begin to understand how a nightwalker could do the same.

"Well, if this monstrosity's in the Domain of E, then Hado's become a sort of natural disaster—like the Divine Dragon. Anything not in the Domain of E can't touch him. On top of that, anything he bites turns into another nightwalker. If this thing gets out into the city…"

"Then the capital of Seifort very quickly becomes a city of the dead."

Damn it. And Memil is still trapped inside the facility. I looked behind to find I was fast approaching another facility. I swiftly repositioned myself to use its wall as a launch pad, then sprang back toward the Vlerick research facility, but—

"What?!"

Hado had followed me at such blistering speed that I couldn't move in time to avoid him, and his head collided with mine.

"Fate!" he snarled.

The force of the blow sent us hurtling back again—through the walls, ceiling, and floors, and right out the other side of the facility. As we crashed through smooth wall after wall, I punched Hado in the stomach over and over, clearing just enough space between us to finish with a solid kick up into his jaw.

"Shut up shouting my name already," I said through gritted teeth.

The kick gave me some freedom to move, so I swung the black sword up and brought it down toward Hado. The blade cut into and through him, and he fell silently through the air. I landed some distance away, and as I waited for sign of movement, a breeze caressed my face.

My black skull mask was gone.

I'd had it just moments ago, but now it was gone. At first, I thought I must have lost it when I crashed through the facility. Then I saw it trapped in Hado's jaws. He crunched the mask between his teeth and roared. As he did so, the fatal wound I'd just delivered seemed to go backward in time, repairing itself until it might as well have never happened. I dropped into a battle stance, my blade pointed toward Hado.

That bastard just ate my mask. That was my trademark! Well, according to Myne.

Just as I prepared for Hado's next attack, a group of guards and holy knights arrived on the scene, running toward us both. They had no doubt heard the commotion. They completely ignored me, instead heading straight for Hado.

"What's going on?" one of them shouted.

"Lord Hado Vlerick, what happened here?" asked another.

Hado sniffed the air and swiveled toward the men, his eyes glinting like a hungry dog who had just received fresh meat.

No way…

I shouted a warning. "Get away! All of you, get away from him! Now!"

"What are you talking about?" One of the guards turned to face me. "Hold on—just who are you, anyway? I've never seen you before!"

My pleas fell on deaf ears. The guards and holy knights were suddenly much more interested in my identity than anything else. Suddenly, I also understood why: I'd been announced as heir to the Barbatos name *while wearing my skull mask*, which was now gone. On top of that, the holy knights here were all low-ranking; most of them hadn't even been at my audience with the king. They had no idea who I was.

The only way to make them understand would be to show them. I had to get them to safety before Hado could make his move.

However, Hado was closer to them, and he was fast. He grabbed hold of one of the guards and threw the man straight at me. The guard hurtled forward at a speed that would kill him if I dodged and let him hit the wall. I bounded up to save him, but that bought Hado all the time he needed to make a feast of the others.

Spraying blood and screams of horror filled the air. Hado licked his bloodstained lips as he reached down and pulled holy swords from the belts of two of the fallen holy knights. The blades glowed with a pale blue light as he gripped their hilts. I realized then that Hado had charged them with the Grand Cross tech-art, boosting his attack power immensely.

"Fate!" he roared.

I threw the guard I had just caught to safety as Hado barreled toward me. I was just in time to parry the strikes of his two holy swords with my own black blade.

"Ugh…he's heavy," I muttered.

"Fate, Fate, Fate!" Hado growled over and over.

Hado's movements were sharper now, and more powerful. Had the blood of the fallen holy knights boosted his abilities? To be fair, I'd given up half my stats to heal Lady Aisha just days ago, so my stats were lower than they had been recently, but could Hado have really grown strong enough to challenge me?

I gripped the black sword tighter and pushed Hado back. As he stumbled and regained his footing, the fallen holy knights and guards slowly rose to their feet behind him. They all staggered off in different directions.

This is not *good. They'll only make more nightwalkers if I let them out of sight!* But stopping them would be no simple task. I had my hands full with Hado, and I couldn't kill any of the nightwalkers myself. If my Gluttony tasted them again, I'd be poisoned by their damaged souls. I couldn't handle these monsters on my own.

Just as I was losing hope, a figure swooped down and sliced the lumbering nightwalkers to pieces.

"Aaron! You're here!" I cried.

"Sorry I'm late! It took longer than expected to get the king's official permission to investigate. It's far worse than we thought, isn't it?"

Aaron the Blessed Blade brought his weapon down across Hado's back, his holy sword glowing a familiar pale blue. Blood spurted into the air, and Hado's oppressive aura weakened slightly. I ducked as the nightwalker knight swiped at me, using my momentum to slice him open across the stomach, then dove out of the way to regroup with Aaron.

Aaron, like me, had made it into the Domain of E. His limit break had begun when we fought side by side at Hausen. We'd formed a bond then—and at the very moment when I'd entered the Domain of E in my fight with the Divine Dragon, something had also changed in Aaron. He'd heard a metallic voice in his head say, "*Recalibrating stat points*," and not long afterward, his stats had rocketed to levels unlike any he'd ever dreamed of.

When I'd met Aaron after the fight with the Divine Dragon, seeing him had been a real shock. He'd always been an energetic old man, but he'd grown even more powerful than I could have imagined. Basically, he was a turbo-charged grandpa.

"This reminds me of when we fought the Genesis of Death—and the souls it had trapped in the ruins of Hausen," said Aaron. "You couldn't kill them either. It's because of your Gluttony, isn't it?"

"Observant as always. These nightwalker souls are poison to Gluttony. At best, devouring them hurts me, and at worst…"

As far as I could tell, Hado's soul was the most rotten of them all. *Devouring it a second time might actually kill me*.

“I see. In that case, I guess we’ll have to tag-team him! It’s been a while since we’ve fought like that, and I’m getting excited just thinking about it. Are you ready, Fate?”

“Let’s do it.”

Chapter 15:
The Inhuman

AARON AND I CHARGED at the same time, simultaneously attacking Hado from the left and right in a pincer formation. Our tag-team attack began with me. I faked a high strike, then stepped in deep, shifting my stance and blow to a mid-level attack. Reacting to my movement, Hado blocked my blade with the holy sword in his left hand and brought the other around to counterattack—except Aaron didn't let him. The Blessed Blade used his own sword to force Hado's weapon upward, opening a gap in his defenses.

"Fate!"

"Aaron, get back!"

I charged Greed with the spell Fireball and thrust the burning blade into Hado's heart. Once Aaron darted away to safety, I poured even more magic into the black blade. A pillar of fire erupted into the air, enveloping both Hado and myself because of my proximity. In the next instant, the fire pulsed with a shock wave that threw me back, rolling along the ground to where Aaron waited. Glass and chunks of wall from nearby buildings fell like rain from the explosion.

"Fate, are you all right?" Aaron reached down for me with his free hand. "Don't do anything rash."

"I'm fine, it's just a little fire. Burns like this heal in no time."

With the Health Regen and Health Regen Boost skills, my wounds often healed before I was even aware of them. Hado's healing speed was monstrous, and I…wasn't so different. I took Aaron's hand and got to my feet, then looked to where Hado burned in the distance.

"That healing ability—it's incredible." Aaron watched in amazement as Hado writhed in the flames and smoke. The parts of Hado that had melted and burned off were growing back as his body rapidly repaired itself in spite of the continuing damage. But he wasn't just regenerating—Hado's skin was transforming into a much harder substance.

I shook my head. "That thing, it's not Hado anymore, it's…" But I didn't have the words to describe what I saw. For what Hado had become.

"Fate, remember this," said Greed. "Those that become nightwalkers have no heart. They lose what made them human, and when they move into the Domain of E, it results in Soul Decay."

Hado had finally become a monster in the truest sense of the word. His mouth split open to his ears, and ragged fangs grew from within that wide maw. His body deformed as it developed, sprouting rough, reddish-black patches like hardened scales of fresh blood. A pair of black wings burst from his spine, symbols of his demonic rebirth.

"If that girl hadn't saved you after you faced the Divine Dragon… you'd have met the same end."

The thought made me grimace. If I ever lose myself to Gluttony… With the wealth of power I've gathered in the Domain of E…if I ever lose what makes me a person…it would be the death of my human self and the birth of a monster unlike any the world has ever seen.

"You scared, Fate?" Greed asked with an audible smirk.

"No. But I can't help but wonder…was the Divine Dragon human once too?"

"And if it was?"

I said nothing, and Greed laughed. "I told you at the start. The Domain of E is a place beyond humanity, and I didn't exaggerate. But remember: you entered this domain yourself, Fate. Willingly."

As I stood there frozen on the precipice of battle, a voice called me back to my senses.

"Fate, what's wrong?" It was Aaron.

"I'm okay. But Hado…"

He stood silent among the flames, but the air he gave off had grown heavier. His eyes slowly opened to reveal a crimson glare.

"What?!"

"How the—?!"

Before we could blink, Hado had moved behind us. Was this the power of his new black wings?! He raised his two swords high into the air and brought them down on us in heavy slashes. We parried the attacks in a shower of sparks, but both Aaron and I were sent flying back and through the walls of a nearby facility.

I staggered up from the piles of broken rubble and found myself in a strange laboratory. Countless cylinders surrounded me, each one filled with a woman submerged in an amber liquid. They reminded me of preserved specimens, like insects or birds frozen in time for safekeeping. Stranger still was the fact that the rage-crazed Hado had not followed us inside.

I stared around, and when I spied the crest on the wall, I realized we were back in the Vlerick facility. I felt drawn to one woman in particular who was trapped like the others in her own glass cylinder. She was beautiful. Like something otherworldly. But who was she?

"Lina Vlerick," murmured Aaron, bewildered. "But why? Why would she be here? She's been dead for well over ten years."

Lina Vlerick? Based on the name, I could only gather that she was somehow related to Rafale, Hado, and Memil. "Who is she?"

Aaron kept his guard up as he spoke, always ready for Hado. "Though I don't know the exact details, I know this is Rafale's birth mother, Lina. She was always frail, but giving birth to Rafale put even more strain on her body. She died some years later. I never imagined I would see her again, and not in a place like this…not with these other girls…"

I took in the room, so different from the laboratories I had seen before. A lavishly decorated affair, it felt more like a room designed to showcase a collection—or to satisfy the particular desires of its collector.

I approached the cylinder containing Lina Vlerick and noticed thin scratches on the outside of the glass. At my feet, a gold emblem was inlaid in the floor, but something had gouged into the emblem over and over, rendering it unreadable. I noticed one last thing by Lina Vlerick's cylinder that differentiated it from the rest: Flowers had been left beside the emblem as if at a gravestone. The flowers were fresh. Recently placed.

As Aaron and I stared around, we heard footsteps approaching—casual, and in no particular hurry. Then the door to the room opened with great force, and standing in its doorway was a person I knew only too well. He hadn't changed in the slightest, and a familiar, hateful grin spread across his face as his eyes fell on Aaron.

"My, oh, my. To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from the Blessed Blade himself? And what are you doing here of all places, Lord Aaron Barbatos? I must say, I'd prefer it if you could stop putting holes in my walls. I expect better behavior from my guests, whether they're the Blessed Blade or otherwise."

Rafale had eyes for Aaron and Aaron alone. I was nothing to him, just like I had always been.

"Rafale!" I shouted. "What is all this?!"

Rafale finally turned to me. It seemed to irk him that I stood by Aaron's side. "Fate? Is that you?" He spat my name, like it tasted foul in his mouth. "Well, now, haven't you grown since the last time I saw you? I heard about it, you know—that you're the heir to the Barbatos family name. What in the world does a person like *you* have to do to earn a position like *that*?"

"Rafale, you—"

I took a step forward, but Aaron put out a hand to stop me. It seemed I had done exactly what Rafale expected, and he burst into laughter. His insane cackle echoed through the room and sent a shiver down my spine. Talk about *creepy*.

When he finally finished laughing, Rafale walked straight by us and stopped in front of Lina Vlerick.

"Today's a very special day," he said. "I wanted to start now, but it seems *somebody* already got things going. No matter. It's as I expected. Today's the anniversary of the day I lost her, after all. My mother. And today, with this power, do you know what I'll do to this kingdom?"

"Rafale?!"

"That's right, Fate," said Rafale. "I can feel it from you too. The same strength. How do you feel now that you have it? How does it feel to have unlimited power?! With this, I can accomplish everything I never could. And let me tell you, Fate, I'm the real deal. Completely different from that mere beast, Hado."

The color of Rafale's eyes bled until they glowed red. Nightwalker red, but even more vibrant. The hatred that seethed from them made me want to flinch back as they focused on me. Then Rafale pulled a black spear as if from out of thin air and pointed its blade at us.

“Fate, it’s been far too long. I think it’s time I teach you something that sticks.”

Chapter 16:
The Great Call for Blood

GREED REACTED as soon as he saw the black spear in Rafale's hand. "Fate, you're too close! You need to make some space, and you need to do it now! Go!"

I dodged back, but it was too late. The blade of Rafale's black spear seemed to vanish all the way up until just before the place where he gripped it. In the next instant, the vanished blade reappeared in front of me as if from nowhere, driving straight toward the right side of my head. It was too fast! I couldn't get away in time.

"Did you forget about me already?!" Aaron's sword whipped through the air with his cry, knocking the black spear off course. The blade grazed my cheek and plunged into the floor.

"Thanks, Aaron," I gasped.

"Thank me later. First, let's move. We don't want to get trapped fighting in here."

We broke through the wall, leaving the unsettling showroom behind us. However, just as we expected, the monstrous Hado awaited us outside.

"FATE!" The monster roared my name into the air and careened straight for us. He'd transformed again and grown even stronger, but the transformation had seemingly swallowed what little was left of his mind. His fighting style had grown simplistic. Though he had blindsided us earlier, he would do no such thing again.

"Hado!" I shouted. "Do it! Come on! Kill me now!"

"Fate!" Hado howled again and again. His crimson eyes burned with fury and he bounded toward me, his two holy swords raised high, ready to slice off both my arms.

"Sorry to disappoint, but your fight is with me!"

Hado's glare had been so focused on me that he didn't realize I was bait. Aaron's holy sword sliced through the air, taking Hado's head off in one clean swipe. The head landed with a heavy thud and rolled along the ground.

However, the headless Hado did not fall. Instead, it stood rigid and still. Something wasn't right.

Oh—no blood. Instead of the fountain that should have spurted from Hado's neck, there was nothing.

"Impossible," Aaron muttered. "His healing powers can do that?"

A new head began to sprout from Hado's neck while his old one still rolled along the ground. First a jaw, then a nose, then his eyes, and finally the top of his skull. Was Hado immortal? And if so, what did we have to do to kill him?!

Aaron and I looked at each other as Rafale slowly walked out of the hole we'd made in the facility behind us.

“Oh? Is that the best you’ve got?” He chuckled. “Fate and the Blade of Light himself… How you disappoint me!”

“What did you do to him? To Hado?”

“I merely gave him some of my blood. You see, *somebody* went and cruelly slaughtered the poor young man, so I had to use a few monster pieces to put him back together. For that, I suppose I do owe you thanks, Fate.” Rafale turned his gaze back toward Hado. “Thanks for killing him.”

“What are you talking about? He’s your little brother!”

“You don’t have the faintest idea what you’re talking about, Fate. But Aaron…you know, don’t you?”

Aaron let a sigh escape him. “What I heard was that, in my day, the head of the Vlerick family could not sire an heir. Disgusted with his wife, he turned to his mistress, who gave birth to Rafale. Overjoyed to have the son he had long wished for, he married the girl, whose name was Lina.”

“You have the story right so far,” said Rafale. “For a time, my mother and I lived happily, but my father was already searching for another bride. Do you know why, Fate? Surely, someone like *you* must have some idea.”

“Your mother…was one of the forsaken?”

“Precisely. My father was entranced by my mother’s beauty. She was made a part of the family, but her class became an inconvenience. Though he was relieved to have the child he’d always wanted, my father still desired a wife of higher standing. And when he found her, Hado and Memil came along. The rest is as you saw in that laboratory…he put my mother in a cylinder, and he kept his half-blooded son around as mere insurance—in case Hado didn’t work out.”

“But…I thought you all got along with each other…”

When I thought back, they’d all seemed to have a grand old time bullying me, their lowly gatekeeper. It had always seemed like Rafale was the older brother watching over his younger siblings.

“Forever blind to the world around you, aren’t you, Fate? That’s why you never noticed Roxy Hart either. People like you deserve to be used and abused. You’re practically asking for it.”

Rafale sent his black spear streaking forward—it vanished into space again until it reappeared behind me. I twisted to avoid the incoming thrust, but it still caught me, cutting into my side.

“You’ve got some reflexes, Fate, I’ll give you that. So, now that I’m warmed up, perhaps we can get to the real thing…the great call for blood. Awaken, my brethren!”

With a twisted grin, Rafale released an unfathomable amount of magical energy. Hado, now finished healing, reacted to the flow and let loose an echoing roar. A wave of groans rose from within the Vlerick research facility. A countless number of voices condensed together like a storm. The facility walls crumbled under the pressure of the nightwalkers fighting to escape.

“How could there be so many of them…?”

Rafale laughed maniacally. “Well? What do you think? Surely this will be enough to bring Seifort to its knees. Then we can finally be done with the pathetic hierarchy that rules this place. You hate it too, don’t you, Fate? The idea of a world ruled by those with the most powerful skills. Rejoice! For I, Rafale, shall change this world in which you so suffered.”

“You’re the last person I want doing that, Rafale! Even if you overthrow the kingdom, you’ll never care about the forsaken people who live here!”

“Of course I won’t. Why should I worry myself with pathetic creatures so far beneath me? In the new world, I will sit over them all, and all others will live below me—as equals. My world shall be truly fair!”

Aaron and I couldn’t possibly hold off this many nightwalkers alone. On top of that, Rafale stood in front of us and Hado behind us. Aaron and I backed up against one another, glaring at our enemies.

“I’ve been observing that guy,” Greed said, cutting into my thoughts. “Rafale, is it? Anyway, he’s got it inside of him. The source of the nightwalkers. I remember the color of his eyes. He more or less admitted it earlier when he said he’d given Hado some of his blood. That makes things nice and straightforward: Kill Rafale before the nightwalkers escape the Military District.”

“Just him, then?”

“Should do it. If you kill the source, you sever all connections to its blood. But don’t expect any miracles, Fate. Anyone who’s already been turned won’t return to normal. They’ll crumble to ashes. However…unlike them, it looks like Rafale’s soul hasn’t decayed too far yet. If you devour his soul, I’m pretty sure you’ll be fine.”

I gripped the black sword. *Finally, some good news.*

If Hado was practically immortal, then the quickest way to defeat him would be through Rafale. I transformed the black sword into the black bow and turned my head to Aaron. “Message from Greed: Rafale is controlling the nightwalkers.”

“So in order to put an end to this madness, we need to kill Rafale Vlerick.”

“Exactly.”

Aaron charged his holy sword with even more magic, further boosting his attack power. “Very well. I’ll keep Hado busy while you take Rafale. But with this many nightwalkers out already, be ready for things to get messy.”

“Got it. If the opportunity presents itself, we’ll tackle them together.”

“Indeed. Now let’s get to it!”

I loaded the black bow with a magic arrow and fired it directly at Rafale. As I loosed my crackling arrow, Aaron and I split off, each dashing in opposite directions.

My long-destined battle with the Vlericks had truly begun.

Chapter 17:
The Flashing Black Spear

RAFALE DEFTLY SPLIT my arrow in half with his black spear. As expected, straightforward attacks were no use against him. Nightwalkers piled out of the research facility, and Aaron cut them down as he fought to hold back the immortal Hado. Rafale turned his gaze toward the holy knight and sent his spear flashing through space—straight for Aaron's back.

As I pulled back to reload the bow, Greed cut in.

"Charge your next magic arrow with Sandstorm and aim for the tip of the black spear!"

I did as directed and released the arrow. Wrapped in swirls of elemental earth magic, it flew straight for the tip of Rafale's spear. Rafale spotted the arrow and deflected it as though it were an annoyance before directing his next attack at me.

"What?!" Rafale exclaimed.

The earth magic had encased the tip of Rafale's spear in stone, interfering with his ability to send it wherever he pleased.

"I'd appreciate your words of wisdom a little earlier next time," I muttered.

"Sorry, but I'm not too familiar with that spear. It's changed since I last saw it. And that was a long time ago—I couldn't be sure it was the same one at first. But those portal jumping attacks are a telltale sign. Fate, Rafale's wielding a prototype Weapon of Mortal Sin. That one is called Vanity."

"A prototype?"

"Unlike the rest of us, Vanity doesn't have a soul, or…to be more accurate, our souls are a sort of safety mechanism. Lacking one of its own, in order to unleash its power, Vanity drains the life of its wielder."

Rafale glared at the end of the black spear in disgust and drove it into the ground. The stone and sand broke off and dissipated into the air. I saw then that the hand with which he held the spear was bleeding.

"Wait, by 'drains the life,' do you mean Vanity drains his *blood*?"

"Yes, and it uses the life energy contained within that blood to power its portal-jumping attacks. Any ordinary person wielding that spear would quickly find themselves essentially mummified. All out of the red stuff!"

"So the reason Rafale can continue to wield it without issue is because he also has the power of the nightwalkers within him…"

"Exactly. He's made of even sterner stuff than Hado. What's the plan, Fate?"

"We eat or we die!"

"That's the spirit!"

With the black spear momentarily stuck, I closed in on Rafale only to find my path blocked by more nightwalkers. Rafale was controlling them,

using them to herd me back. I transformed the black bow into the black sword and wove around the nightwalkers as they tried to bite me, occasionally chopping off their legs to keep them from overwhelming me.

Just as Rafale attempted to skewer me with his black spear again, I broke free of the horde and blocked with my sword, stopping the spear in place.

"I see you have a few annoying tricks up your sleeve," Rafale snapped.

"Did you manage to get all that sand off? Guess not, if you're actually facing me yourself. What's the matter? Did I mess with your spear?"

"That's rich coming from scum like you. As I recall, not so long ago, you were begging for your life—from beneath my boot."

Our two weapons—the black sword and the black spear—were locked in place as we pushed against one another. But getting stuck here put me at a disadvantage. The nightwalkers still surrounded us, and they lumbered forward, their eyes locked on me.

Greed had warned me that one bite would leave me cursed. One bite that could cut straight through the Domain of E and turn me into a nightwalker. That would make me a mindless slave to Rafale's whims. Hence why he so strove to keep our weapons locked together. He wanted to add me to his horde of underlings.

As far as I knew, at least two other people in the kingdom were in the Domain of E: the two bodyguards who protected the king, who wore white armor from head to toe. If they followed the king's orders, it stood to reason that the king was no ordinary person either. That meant that if Rafale really did intend to overthrow Seifort, he needed control of similarly powerful individuals—namely Aaron and myself.

"Where are you going to run now, Fate?" A crazed grin spread across Rafale's face as he pushed his spear harder. The nightwalkers behind me moaned.

However, my eyes remained on Rafale, assured and confident. "Seems you've been alone so long that you've forgotten some of us have allies, Rafale."

"What?!"

From behind, I heard the sound of nightwalkers being sliced into pieces, and through it a voice bellowed. "Fate!"

As Rafale's eyes momentarily darted to Aaron behind me, I parried his spear to the side and kicked him in the head with the Brawl skill's tech-art, Ruinous Strike. Chunks of Rafale's face splattered through the air as I leaped backward, swapping places with Aaron. Behind Aaron came Hado, flying in on the strength of his black wings. But Hado had eyes only for me. It was only thanks to Aaron that he hadn't yet reached me.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Fate!"

"Faaaate!" Hado roared.

I unleashed Gluttony, plunging myself into my half-starved state. I felt my right eye stain with a deep red that would send most cowering in fear.

Hado had literally been decapitated, yet still he did not die. He was a monster. A human who had lost his own heart and soul, all that he once had been ruined to bring his body to the Domain of E. He swooped in low, his two holy swords primed to strike. I dodged around the first and sliced off Hado's left arm at the shoulder before the second blade could find its mark. I didn't stop there either.

"How about this?!" I shouted.

Ducking Hado's strikes, I raised my sword into a high guard, then brought it down from the top of Hado's head all the way through him, slicing him cleanly in two. Both halves rolled along the ground and slammed into the walls of a nearby facility.

As I heaved to catch my breath, I turned to see Aaron with his sword through Rafale's chest. Rafale's head was still crushed. Aaron's holy blade had pierced his heart. Aaron lifted the sword up into the air with Rafale skewered on it and shouted. "Grand Cross!"

All the magical energy Aaron had poured into his blade was unleashed in an instant, and the darkness of the night was suddenly illuminated. From within the blinding light, I felt Aaron pour even more magic into the attack. Rafale took the entirety of the Grand Cross from the inside out, through the sword that had impaled him.

It was an attack of unbelievable power—one I didn't think I myself could stand, were I on the receiving end.

When the holy light finally subsided, Rafale stood unmoving with a gaping hole in his chest. The hole was like a frame through which I saw all the rubble and shrapnel and bodies from our battle through the Military District. A cold wind cut through the air and snow gently floated down from the sky.

Aaron's eyes were saddened as he stood facing Rafale. "Is this not enough to stop you, Rafale Vlerick?"

"I don't have enough blood," Rafale rasped. "I need more blood. But tell me…is this really the best a holy sword can do? It's…laughable, at best."

Abruptly, Aaron released his sword and crumpled to the ground with a cry of pain. Rafale's black spear had jumped through a portal and plunged deep into Aaron's side.

"Once you join me, all that pain will vanish, and you will be released of all your worldly responsibilities. Rest easy and be at peace, Blessed Blade." Rafale lumbered forward and opened his mouth wide to bite deep into Aaron's throat.

"Not while I'm around!" I gripped the black sword tight and flung it toward Rafale's mouth.

But with a speed I couldn't comprehend, Rafale's mouth erupted into a mess of ragged fangs. He snapped his teeth over Greed's blade, catching it in a vicious bite.

Chapter 18:
Bloodthirsty

WITH RAFALE'S TEETH still scraping along the blade of the black sword, I drove him back, straight through the outer wall of the research facility. Then I leaped back to check on Aaron.

"Aaron, are you hurt?"

"I'll be fine, but I've lost a good amount of blood."

Aaron's wound was already closing, thanks in large part to his high stats. However, the blood he'd lost made a slick pool on the ground beneath us. A glance at his face told me that he was still weak. Still, he rose to his feet, his eyes zeroed in on Rafale's direction.

From the wreckage of the outer wall, Rafale sent up a torrential wave of rubble and debris as he reappeared before us, completely healed. We'd burst his head open and impaled him through the heart, but that didn't matter. We could destroy these vital organs as many times as we liked, and he would still keep moving. He was no longer human but a monster in human skin.

"Is this what Lina would have wanted for you, Rafale?" Aaron called.

"I will not hear it, old man."

"If in fact she did wish for her own blood, her own son, to become what you have, then my heart aches for you both, Rafale."

"I said shut it, or else I'll—gah!"

Rafale suddenly fell to his knees, his breath growing heavy, twitching as though he was struggling to control something inside himself. I knew the feeling well. Rafale looked like I did when I fought Gluttony's insatiable hunger for souls.

However, when I had fought and then devoured the chimera called Haniel in Galia, I had gained the help of Luna, the girl who had been trapped within that Galian weapon. Thanks to her assistance in controlling the urges of Gluttony, I no longer needed to devour as many souls to keep it satisfied. With her, I could maintain balance. But that was only true until I reached my half-starved state. If I unleashed the entirety of my Gluttony, I would regress back into the starved berserker I had become when I fought the Divine Dragon in Galia.

In the ashes of that fight, my soul had been saved because Lady Roxy had chosen to reach out and rescue me from the brink. I had decided never to rely on that power again. If I fell to the starving depths of true Gluttony a second time, the one I would hunger for the most would be none other than Lady Roxy herself.

Luna had called Lady Roxy my bastion. But that bastion existed only as a sacrifice to quell the urges of my Gluttony. The prospect alone terrified me.

In the shivering Rafale that stood before me, I sensed the same struggle. The same grappling for control.

"Damn it all to hell! Not now, not…again…" Rafale reached up and frantically scratched his forehead as if something fought to release itself from his skin. Then he reached down and grabbed two vials filled with red liquid from a small case strapped to his thigh. He drank them down in one gulp. "Is this not enough…?"

As Rafale grappled with whatever was roiling inside him, the nightwalker formations began to crumble. At the same time, an army of soldiers and holy knights arrived to push the monsters back. They had mobilized when they'd heard the sounds of battle. I spied two knights in striking white armor among the reinforcements: the king's bodyguards.

I turned to Aaron, who nodded. "It seems the king's orders have finally reached the cavalry," he said. "They've arrived."

"With the nightwalkers in disarray, they should be able to handle it, right?"

"I believe so, which means there's one thing left to take care of." Aaron turned his gaze back to Rafale. "Rafale! Whatever you've done to yourself—it's beyond your ability to handle. You must understand that great power comes at great cost. When you accept such a power, you also accept its weight, but here you refuse to accept it."

"Shut up! *He* craved power too… *He* was driven by hate! And he did what he did *because* of the pain! Isn't that right, Fate? You hate me, don't you?" Rafale glared at me, challenging me.

"I don't know what link the two of you share, and perhaps what you say is true, Rafale. Or at least, perhaps it *was* true, once. The Fate I met in Hausen is not the Fate who stands with me now." Aaron put his hand on my shoulder and nodded.

I looked Rafale in the eyes. "You're pitiful, Rafale."

"Shut up! Not you! Not from you! Remember when you killed Hado? Remember that hate?"

"I…I can't deny how I felt when I faced your brother. But I can't go on living like that."

I pointed the blade of the black sword at Rafale and walked toward him. In the distance, one half of Hado's body rebuilt itself, but it did so all too slowly. This alone was proof that Rafale's power had weakened. Even if he was functionally immortal, in his current state, we could at least restrain him.

He also apparently couldn't afford to use the black spear's portal attacks, as when his weapon met mine, we clashed in a purely physical deadlock.

"Answer me this," I said as our weapons pushed back and forth, "where did you get that power? That spear?"

"Do you really think I'd tell the likes of you?"

"Fine. Then I'll make you talk."

The black sword edged forward, pushing and pushing until it sliced into Rafale's left shoulder. A streak of pain flashed across his face, and his crooked teeth clenched tight.

He's immortal, but he still feels pain. That meant that when I'd broken his face, when Aaron impaled him, and when his chest was gouged open—he'd felt all of it. *Rafale…is that how badly you want your victory?*

Rafale glared at me, screaming. "Hado! You worthless piece of trash! I'm giving you an order! Move, damn it!"

The regenerating Hado lurched his grotesque half-formed body to its feet and flapped toward us on one wing. Aaron dodged in for the attack, slicing off Hado's remaining wing and sending him tumbling. But Hado's momentum sent him straight into me and Rafale. I leaped back to avoid the collision.

Rafale laughed. "You're useful after all, brother!"

Using his brother as a momentary shield, Rafale fled through the hole in the outer wall and back into a research facility—the Vlerick research facility. Hado swung his broken holy sword in an effort to slow me down, but with his head still sliced in half, he couldn't see well enough to focus.

"Get out of my way, Hado." I sliced him once more into two pieces across the waist. Then I kicked the pieces across the floor, watching as he again struggled to repair himself.

"Leave Hado and the nightwalkers to me," I heard Aaron call from behind. "Go after Rafale. Put an end to this."

"Don't push yourself too hard, Aaron."

His wound might have healed, but he'd lost all that blood. Under better circumstances, he should have been resting. But Aaron wasn't one to complain or falter in the heat of battle. I'd have to take the chance he'd given me to finish things myself.

I entered the facility through the hole in the wall and scanned the area. *Where did you go, Rafale? Up…or down?*

A familiar scream pierced the air, coming from the hole Hado had created when he first knocked me out of the facility. The rubble led to the basement. That scream likely belonged to whoever Rafale was attacking. There was also a good chance something down there was important to Rafale, because it was where all the nightwalker research had been done.

Then I realized why I recognized that voice. It belonged to Rafale's younger sister, Memil. I'd dropped her when Hado first threw me. Rafale must have found her on his way down. But if he'd attacked his own sister… Dread lanced through me, and my grip tightened on the hilt of the black sword.

"Hang on a second," said Greed, "don't tell me you've come all this way and now you're too scared to head back down there!!"

"I'm going. But tell me this first: Has Rafale become the bearer of a Skill of Mortal Sin?"

"As a bearer yourself, you should be able to tell better than anyone."

“I don’t know quite how to put it… He’s similar, but there’s something different about him. It’s weird.”

“Ha! Looks like you’ve started putting the pieces together!”

“What does that mean?”

“All things in good time, Fate.”

I aimed for the experiment room as I leaped down. That room filled with glass cylinders of red liquid, all of which contained one of an array of different creatures. The room where I had first discovered Hado.

Chapter 19:
Soul Decay

WHEN I LANDED in the laboratory, I found every last one of the cylinders broken, the creatures once preserved within them spread limp across the floor. The red liquid that had filled the cylinders now seeped everywhere, vivid and translucent. Somewhere in the darkness of the room, I heard a voice: Memil.

She had been unable to open her eyes when I found her, but now I heard her cry out in pain, questioning. “Why? Brother, why would you do this…?”

She received no response but for the wet sound of sucking. Alarm bells rang inside my mind. *Don’t get any closer! Don’t look!* But move closer I did, and as crimson liquid rippled out from my footsteps, I came across the tragic sight I’d anticipated.

Rafale was drinking the blood from Memil’s neck. To work his powers, he needed to periodically feed on blood. He had been trying to get more from those vials just before he fled. However, even with all those vulnerable soldiers and holy knights collecting outside, Rafale had instead come down here to seek out Memil. That meant there was something special about *her* blood, and it also meant that ordinary blood couldn’t really satisfy the power within Rafale.

When I’d first found Memil, she had already looked drained and pallid. Was blood loss the true reason for her prior unconsciousness? Now awake, she was once again losing what blood she had left to her brother. The look on her face was pained and uncomprehending.

Rafale lifted his head from her throat, then tossed Memil’s body into a corner of the room. “I have drunk my fill, and I am refreshed. The power flows through me again—no! Now I am *more* than I was.”

Rafale’s eyes were stained the intense scarlet of freshly spilled blood, and his muscles expanded to the point that they threatened to burst through his clothes. He was drunk on his own power.

“Rafale, how could you?” I pointed my sword at him. “Your own sister?”

“Sister? Funny, I’ve never considered her such. But I suppose she was a nice way to kill a little time…for a sniveling idiot. The daughter of the woman who drove away my mother, and they expected me to accept her as my sister?! She’s nothing but a tool to maintain my power.”

Rafale cackled maniacally, and as her consciousness once again faded, Memil’s face contorted in silent sadness. A tear rolled down her pallid cheek. Rafale clutched his stomach at the sight of her, spasming with cruel laughter.

“Oh, you stupid, stupid girl! As soon as I could, I taught her to look down on people, and she did exactly that. You have to laugh, don’t you? She

let herself be groomed into a copy of that piece of shit we called a father! You have to know what I'm talking about, right, Fate? After all, you were just one of many we treated like filth!"

"That's enough, Rafale. You—"

But Memil had already fallen unconscious. The blood from her neck no longer flowed, allowing me to see that the wound itself was a thin slash, likely a knife cut. Rafale hadn't bitten into her neck to suck the blood directly. Doing so would have turned her into a nightwalker, and if that happened, his regenerating source of untainted blood would vanish.

"Well, then, Fate," Rafale sneered. "Ready for round two?" He didn't wait for an answer. He swung his spear as he moved in toward me. Our weapons clashed together for a third time, pushing against one another in perfect equilibrium.

His power is equal to mine in my half-starved state…

"What's the matter, Fate? Is that *really* the best you've got?"

We poured extra power into our weapons at the same time, causing a shock wave that sent us both flying. Rafale recovered first, grinning and preparing to attack again with his black spear.

"He's going to send that spear through a portal again. Get ready for it on two levels this time," said Greed, observing Rafale's movement.

"What do you—"

I readied myself for Rafale's spear to come darting at me from a blind spot. As predicted, it flew out from behind me and to the right. I dodged the strike. But Rafale had read my movements, and in the next instant, the spear disappeared into empty space a second time. Even though Greed had warned me, I wasn't quick enough to dodge the next attack. The spear ran deep into my left side.

"I have to hand it to you, Fate. I missed my target. I was *actually* aiming for your heart. But tell me, does it hurt? It hurts, doesn't it? Doesn't this bring back old memories?"

I coughed up blood. Rafale pushed the spear deeper as he spun me around. Pain lanced through my body, numbing my head. However, with the spear stabbed into me, Rafale could no longer send it through space. I gripped the spear lodged in my side with both hands and cast Sandstorm. "You let your guard down, Rafale, and now you're going to pay for it."

"No…release me!"

"Not even if you asked nicely!"

I'd noticed something when I fired the arrow imbued with Sandstorm earlier. I could disrupt the black spear's abilities with magic, essentially rendering its portal attacks useless. The spear rapidly turned to stone where I gripped it, running through the portals and shooting steadily toward Rafale's grip.

"Rafale!" I shouted, pouring more magic through my hand into the spear.

The Sandstorm spell moved from the spear to Rafale's hands, turning his fingers, hands, and arms to stone. I watched carefully. When the timing was right, I pulled free of the spear's blade and yanked it to the side with all the strength I could muster.

Rafale let out a cry of pain that echoed alongside the shattering of stone. His arms cracked from his body and crumbled to the floor. Now disconnected from its wielder, the spear warped through the portals until it was completely in my grasp. Thanks to my Health Regen and Health Regen Boost skills, the wound in my side was already almost healed.

"I wouldn't hold Vanity for too long if I were you," said Greed. "You'll start losing blood, and fast."

"Wasn't intending to. The only partner I need is you."

"Ha ha! That's what I like to hear!"

I stabbed the spear into the ground and walked toward Rafale. "Give it up, Rafale. You've lost your spear. You've got nothing left."

"Don't be stupid. I'm just as powerful as you are! We've only just started." Rafale's arms rebuilt themselves from his shoulders. He glared at me, but without Vanity, he was no longer a threat.

Greed said the black spear was different from when he'd seen it last. If so, my guess was that meant Rafale had been unable to unlock its true potential. I didn't know exactly what that looked like, but I did know that if the spear at all resembled the other Weapons of Mortal Sin, it had at least one secret technique. Vanity's was probably incredibly difficult to access.

Where had Rafale found it, anyway? And where had he found the source of the nightwalkers? It almost felt like Rafale had been goaded into using both, even though he couldn't handle either well enough to unleash their true power. Even Aaron had seen it was all too much for him to handle.

"I'll say it again. You've lost, Rafale."

"Big words from the likes of you, scum…scum, scum, scum-scum… scum…"

"Rafale?"

Rafale repeated the word over and over, as if it were a cog in a machine that wasn't working correctly. "No, wait!" he cried suddenly, as if talking to himself. "I can still do it. This isn't what we agreed to! I just need more time…"

Rafale's head slumped to his chest, his consciousness fading. His body shuddered, twitched, and when he raised his head again, he wore the expression of another person entirely: the open and eager expression of a young boy who had just discovered a new game.

"Rafale Vlerick has disappointed me," this new Rafale said. "I thought I could enjoy things as they were for a little longer, but, alas, it's not to be. And to think I loaned him all that power. All that strength! A shame. Wouldn't you agree, my Gluttonous young friend? And how about you, Greed?"

What the hell is this all of a sudden?! Rafale's never once called me "Gluttonous."

"Well, in any case," Rafale's body continued in this new, eloquent manner. "He had his uses. He was a fine vessel for incubating my new body. I must say, it doesn't really matter *what* generation the person is from: Hearts aged with a lust for revenge are always the most delicious. But seeing as I still need a teensy bit more time to bring myself back completely, perhaps I'll grant him his final wish while we wait."

The smile on his face in that moment wore an inscrutable expression that Rafale Vlerick never had. "I wonder if you'll be able to stop me, young Mr. Gluttony. Let's begin with this!"

I was suddenly bombarded by cascading waves of intense pressure.

"Get away, Fate!" shouted Greed. "Get away now!"

Rafale began gathering magical energy into himself, readying to let it burst in a flare and overtake the space around him. But I couldn't leave the black spear as it was. I grabbed it and was about to leap to safety when I noticed Memil, still lying limp on the ground.

"Hurry up, Fate!"

"Don't worry, I'm on it!"

"Fate, you—"

I hefted Memil over my shoulder, then bounded up from the basement to outside the facility in one shot. As I did, the entire structure exploded, sending shrapnel and debris high into the sky. The wreckage fell along with the late-night snow across the entirety of the kingdom. Cries of horror and distress rose up from not just the Military District but the other districts as well.

Aaron ran over to my side when I landed.

"What's going on, Fate? That's Memil, I presume? What happened to Rafale? Hado and the other nightwalkers turned to dust just moments ago. I assumed that meant you killed him, but—"

"He's, uh…"

I looked up from the rubble of the facility and into the sky only to see the colossal form of an inhuman monster hovering overhead, its great black wings beating.

Greed had said that soulless creatures who reached the Domain of E suffered from Soul Decay, an affliction that turned them into monsters such as nightwalkers. Did that mean that the creature inside of what had once been Rafale Vlerick had become something else—something like the Divine Dragon? I didn't know if it would work, but I tried to use my Identify skill all the same.

The Ascent Drenched in Blood
Undead Archdemon, Lv ???
Vitality: 6.10e8
Strength: 6.30e8
Magic: 9.30e8

Spirit: 9.90e8
Agility: 7.20e8
Skills: Holy Sword Technique, Strength Boost (high), Dark Magic, Undivided Mind

Cold blue skin. Two long horns jutting from its head. Four pitch-black wings sprouting from its back. It was a more refined and sophisticated version of the horror Hado had become.

And I had no idea what level the creature was. I knew it had a unique name, making it a crowned beast, and I knew its stats surpassed my own. Lastly, I knew that all that remained of Rafale Vlerick were his two original skills: the Holy Sword Technique and his Strength Boost.

Chapter 20:
Lust Enters the Fray

THE UNDEAD ARCHDEMON had two skills I'd never seen before. I used Identify to get a better understanding of them.

Dark Magic: Summons dark matter from another dimension.

Undivided Mind: For a limited time, increases the power of any technical and magical skills fivefold.

I had no idea what dark matter might be. I wondered if it had something to do with the way the facility had exploded.

"You're right," said Greed, reading my puzzled thoughts. "In this world, dark matter is highly unstable. It can't hold its own shape, so it vanishes. When it does, it causes an incredibly high-energy explosion."

"Then what I'm most worried about is whether that last attack also used the Undivided Mind skill…"

Undivided Mind increased the power of its wielder's other skills, so we needed to know if the archdemon had just deployed it as well. If it had, then I didn't need to worry about the dark matter attack getting any bigger. But if it hadn't, then this monster was technically capable of creating an explosion five times larger than the one that had just destroyed the facility. If so, and if the archdemon used Undivided Mind and Dark Magic multiple times, the kingdom of Seifort would be rendered to little more than dust.

I had a comparable skill, Strength Overload. For a short time, that skill doubled my strength, but the advantage came with an accompanying risk. After the boost time ran out, my strength stat dropped to 10 percent of its current max. It took a full day for my stats to return to normal. I had assumed that any limited-time stat boost came with a similar kind of risk, but Undivided Mind bucked the trend.

Greed grunted. "I can't say with complete certainty, but my gut tells me the archdemon still hasn't used Undivided Mind."

"That monster possessing Rafale said it would grant him his wish…"

The monster had spoken with such supreme confidence that I couldn't help also believing that the explosion just now was only the beginning. For now, though, the monster only hovered in the air, silent, its eyes closed.

I glanced at Aaron. He was at his limits, his shoulders heaving with each breath. But he knew the situation the same as I did, and his many years of experience told him just how precarious it was. "Fate, give me Memil. This is as far as I go. If I fought beside you now, I'd only get in your way."

I passed Memil over to Aaron. "Take care of her, please. She's lost a lot of blood. She needs rest now more than anything."

"Leave it to me. We won't be able to shelter in the manor with that thing flying around. For now, I'll evacuate Memil and whatever townspeople I can to Hobgoblin Forest…" Aaron looked up at the monster with a

grimace. “Although I can’t help but think that based on that monster’s stats, perhaps we should go farther.”

Just then, a voice called out to us. I turned to find two white knights running toward us, and between them was a girl with blue hair and an impressive bust. My eye twitched as she called out again.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Fate. I guess I made it just in time, huh?”

“Just in time?! What the hell are we going to do about that thing up there? This could be the end of Seifort as we know it, Eris!”

Before I could say anything else, the two white knights dropped into battle-ready stances and pointed their white spears directly at me.

“He’s fine. Lower your spears,” said Eris. “We’ve got a lot to talk about, Fate, but now’s not the time. We’ll chat once the danger has passed, okay? I assume that’s all right with you, too, Aaron Barbatos? I have you to thank for delivering this information, after all.”

Aaron looked suspiciously at Eris—she’d appeared suddenly out of nowhere, after all—but then something clicked, and he nodded in agreement.

“Your quick understanding is appreciated, Aaron. Fate, you should know that…*I* am the king of Seifort.”

“Huh?! Why would you keep something like that a secret?! You’ve got a lot of explaining to do when this is all over!”

Only then did I notice the black weapon Eris had brought with her—a black gunblade. A chill shot up my spine as a host of memories came rushing back. However, I decided to hold back my opinion for the time being; with the gunblade Envy fighting on my side, it was hard not to feel more confident. I suddenly had to wonder which one of them it was I had seen when Aaron and I had our audience with the king—Eris or her Weapon and one of its human puppets?

“Envy’s always been rather stubborn. The poor thing was a bit traumatized when it lost to you in Galia.”

“And, uh…what’s it saying now?”

“It’s saying I can do as I please. It’s still languishing in self-pity. Feels like a failure.” Eris grinned as she ran a hand along the sheathed gunblade. I couldn’t shake the feeling that even as an inert weapon, it looked horribly unhappy to be where it was.

“But enough talk. My knights, your task is to lead the townspeople out of the kingdom. Our foe clearly outstrips the Divine Dragon, and even shock waves from its attacks could potentially bring down the city.”

“Understood!”

The two white knights bowed and immediately gathered the soldiers and holy knights to aid in the evacuation.

“Fate,” said Aaron, “I’ll see you again when this is over.”

“Yes, and please take care of Memil.”

“She’s in good hands.”

With that, Aaron took off with Memil over his shoulder. I watched as he faded into the distance, then turned my gaze back to the task at hand. “The monster looks about ready to make a move. Are you ready, Eris?”

“It’s been a while since I took part in a real battle, but I trust I can still handle myself. As you’ve probably guessed, I usually play a back line support role. I’ll leave the front line to you.”

When I thought about it, it had been a while since I’d fought alongside another bearer of a Skill of Mortal Sin. The last time had been with Myne.

Speaking of, where is that girl? The sounds we’re making would wake anyone…

But I didn’t have the time to think about it. I settled into a fighting stance as Eris unsheathed the black gunblade and pointed its barrel toward the Undead Archdemon.

Chapter 21:
Dark Matter

THE UNDEAD ARCHDEMON opened its four wings wide and chanted. Eris and Greed reacted instantly.

"Oh, this is bad," said Eris.

"Real bad."

I realized then that the monster was preparing to cast Dark Magic, summoning unstable dark matter to create another huge explosion. My own Fireball was a paltry spark in comparison.

Space warped out of shape overhead as the archdemon cast the Dark Magic spell from five portals in the sky. I transformed the black sword into the black scythe and leaped upward.

"Greed!" I shouted.

The incantation period of Dark Magic was considerably longer than for most other spells. No doubt that was why the archdemon had taken to the air; it needed space to cast without interruption.

However, the black scythe had the power to negate spells—though that power only worked while a spell was being cast. In other words, it would work against the Dark Magic spell as long as the portals remained closed. However, once the dark matter came through, the scythe's blade would be unable to stop it. In a worst-case scenario, I'd be looking at another massive explosion.

But space was still warping, and the portals weren't yet open. Could I make it in time?! I counted as I sliced through each one. "One, two, three—"

Two more remained and I couldn't easily reach them—but that wasn't all I had to worry about, because the archdemon moved in to attack me while still casting.

"Gah!"

The archdemon wound up for a punch. I couldn't dodge while stuck in midair. Just as it swung, a sound like lightning crackled by, and the monster's head spun away from me, blue blood pouring from a crater in its skull.

"Fate, now!"

Eris was playing support like she'd promised. The bullet from her black gunblade had struck the archdemon in the temple with considerable force. But the bullet hadn't completely passed through its head, meaning the crowned beast had a fearsome defense. I nonetheless took the chance and grabbed the monster by its curving horns. I kicked off of its skull as hard as I could, pushing myself through the air toward the last two portals.

"That makes four," I said as I sliced through it. "Just one more to—huh?!"

Dark matter poured from the last portal even as I sliced through it. It was so pitch-black in color that it looked like a void, pure absence, absorbing all light. In an instant, the portal fractured and shattered.

"Fate, transform me into the black shield! You're going to get sucked in!"

Just before I was enveloped in this lightless void, I transformed Greed into the black shield and found myself instead swallowed up by an enormous close-range explosion. For an instant, everything went white. When my sight returned, I found myself hurtling toward the earth. I spun in the air to avoid crashing down headfirst and prepared to land. In the corner of my vision, I saw Eris kiting the archdemon with Envy's bullets to keep it busy.

At the very moment I landed, I sent energy through my legs and into the ground, then sprang immediately back into battle.

"Are you okay?" Eris called.

"I am, thanks to this," I called back, motioning at the black shield before using it to bash the undead archdemon away. I considered it revenge for blowing me up. The monster let out a dull sound as it rolled along the ground, but in moments, it was back on its feet and rising once more into the sky. It soared well above where it had hovered the first time and shot up into the snowy clouds, where it vanished from sight.

That didn't mean it was fleeing. Though I couldn't see it with my eyes, I was in my half-starved state, meaning my right eye could follow the flow of the archdemon's magical energy. I focused my power into my right eye and discovered something incredibly bad brewing within the clouds.

"Eris! It's in the clouds! It's—"

"That's not good. There are so many portals…"

There must be thirty…no, forty. Damn it. It's still making them! I'd never imagined the monster could summon so many portals simultaneously.

"This would be impossible for an ordinary monster," said Greed. "But there's something else inside of it. The source, and… Well, just don't forget that."

"Yeah, but what am I supposed to do? At this rate…"

Eris played a support role, meaning she didn't have the firepower to stop this many attacks. When I looked over at her face, I saw that she was at the end of her rope. Right at that moment, warning sirens wailed out through the kingdom. The sound was so deafening that I wanted to cover my ears.

They've finally started the evacuation in earnest... However, the archdemon was summoning a vast amount of dark matter. If it summoned enough to destroy the kingdom all in one go, every last one of the townspeople would be caught in the blast. Even if they got whatever meager distance they could away from ground zero, there were just too many portals. Based on the blast I had just weathered, anyone less powerful than a holy knight would be incinerated. There would be no survivors.

“Fate! What are you waiting for?” Greed asked, transforming himself all on his own from the black scythe into the black bow.

Is he trying to make fun of me? At a time like this?

“Isn’t it about time you unleashed my First Level secret technique?” he asked.

“Wait, what?! Here?! Now?!”

Eris pounced on me. “After all that time we spent training in Galia and teaching you to master it, now you’re going to be all stingy and hold back? Go on, Fate! Do it!”

“Would you please get off me, Eris?!”

“But you know, I don’t think we have any other choice,” Eris said. “I think this really is our best bet.”

I guessed when it came to this particular problem, Greed and Eris were in agreement. I took a deep breath. “Greed, take 10 percent of my stats.”

“I knew you’d come through! Let me at them!”

As the stats drained from my arm into the bow, the bow grew and morphed into a larger, more ominous form. Like this, Greed was more than a tool of violence—he was an Apocalyptic Weapon of Mortal Sin.

Up until this point, the process was just like the one we’d practiced. This was the road to the Bloody Ptarmigan attack. The new technique Greed and Eris wanted me to unleash began here. At present, the bow was powered by the stats Greed took from me, which was how we had always done it. But now I was learning to truly master the weapon’s form—the secret technique—and make it my own.

The only problem: If my new attack exploded early, it would decimate the city before the archdemon could. But we’d come this far. We couldn’t retreat now. It was time for me to blend the power of the secret technique with my Gluttony—it was time to make use of a modified tech-art, just as I had in Galia.

Even by itself, Greed’s Bloody Ptarmigan attack was incredibly powerful. But by modifying it, I could raise that destructive power to entirely new levels. The only downside was that by doing so, I forfeited Greed’s ability to control it for me. I had to do it all myself.

Controlling that technique on my own had been at the heart of my training in Galia. There, I had struggled, lost consciousness, and suffered for weeks under the unrelenting glares of Myne and Eris. It had been sheer hell. I’d fired the Bloody Ptarmigan until I ran out of stats, and then I’d killed monsters to regain them. Over and over until I finally got it right. But even though I’d at last managed to control the technique, this would be the first time I’d used it in an actual battle.

“Concentrate, Fate…” said Greed.

“Just sit back and watch,” I said.

I pulled back on the bowstring and followed the flow of the archdemon’s magical energy to settle my aim in just the right place. The

black arrow nocked on the string was near bursting with magical energy, flickering with uncanny black lightning. I focused on letting myself melt into the bow, becoming one with it, connecting it with my Gluttony.

“Let’s see how you like this modified Bloody Ptarmigan!” Together with my shout, I poured myself deeper and deeper into the weapon, and when it reached critical mass, the black arrow itself transformed from a single straight arrow into a double spiral.

There was no doubt left in my mind. This was the right course of action.

I aimed the bow at the archdemon and fired the Bloody Ptarmigan Cross.

Two colossal bolts of spiraling lightning spun through the air, tearing into the snowy clouds floating above the kingdom of Seifort. Everything they touched was ripped away and taken deep into the far reaches of the sky—from the summoned portals of dark matter to their summoner, the undead archdemon itself. The night sky lit up as though the sun had suddenly sprung out from hiding.

Chapter 22:
The Crushing Black Axe

THE WARNING SIRENS around Seifort continued to wail. The moon peeked out from a gap in the disorderly mess of clouds above, where I had pulverized the archdemon and its clustered dark matter portals with the Bloody Ptarmigan Cross attack.

I wanted to believe that it was impossible for anything to survive an attack so powerful, but I knew that the archdemon was yet undefeated. The proof lay in the fact that I had heard no metallic voice informing me of its death, or the stats I had devoured, or the skills I had stolen. I focused with my right eye, tracing the flow of its magic far off into the distance.

"It's still alive…" I said.

"So it seems," agreed Eris. "It *is* immortal, after all."

I could tell from its magical energy that the monster was at least weakened, but that it was also healing as we spoke. It was still so far away. I had sent the beast as far as the modified secret technique would send it, and I had no attacks that went any farther. I didn't want to let it get away, but I also sensed that it didn't intend to; it had said itself that it would destroy the kingdom for Rafale. Even so, any enemy that could fly was a bad match-up for both Eris and myself, who were both better against ground-based combatants.

"If only I were as strong as I was at my peak," Eris sighed, "then we'd still have a fighting chance."

Apparently, she hadn't used her Weapon of Mortal Sin in so long that she still didn't have full control over it, as she had in the past. When Envy had told Eris she "could do as she pleased," what the gunblade *meant* was that it wasn't going to help her. Because of this, Eris only had two support attacks to rely on:

Phalanx Bullet (Charge 5): Creates a magic aura, drastically decreasing an enemy's attack power for three strikes.

Vanish Bullet (Charge 7): Eliminates all trace of the wielder. Effective until the wielder receives an attack.

They were strong skills, but they couldn't be used at will. They had to be charged by firing and hitting enemies with magic bullets. In other words, Phalanx Bullet could trigger only after an enemy had been hit by five bullets and Vanish Bullet after seven.

The gunblade held seven bullets at a time, after which it required a thirty-second recharge period. If Eris fired too recklessly, it was hard to unleash her support attacks. In order to use the weapon effectively, she had to balance her bullets with her charge status.

"That's as good as I've got right now," said Eris. "I've got a charge building from my attacks, but nothing I can use for this situation. Well, unless you do what you did earlier one more time."

“I can’t just fire the Bloody Ptarmigan Cross whenever I want, you know!”

“Surely you can do it at least once more, right? Come on!”

If I continued to use the technique, I’d lose more and more of my stats. Fairly quickly, I wouldn’t be able to fight the archdemon at all. All the same, as I stood here with Eris and fought alongside her, I didn’t feel a hint of anxiety from her. Even at this critical stage in the battle, she looked as carefree as if we were at a picnic. Would the destruction of Seifort actually mean her own demise?

“Why are you looking at me so funny?” asked Eris. Then it clicked. “Ah! My attitude makes you uncomfortable, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah…”

“I’m afraid it’s because I’ve been alive for so long. I think I’ve become a bit desensitized to the concept of death, both for myself and for others. I know what you want to say, but this is just how it goes, so it can’t be helped.” Then, in a stage whisper, she dramatically added, “I used to be such a delicate, fragile young girl…”

I couldn’t help but wonder how much truth there was to this claim. Perhaps her ability to say such a thing was proof that she was no longer the young girl she once had been?

“There *is* one thing in me that has never faded. Not in the past, and not now…” For a moment, Eris’s eyes stared into my own, and I felt as though she were looking through me, into somebody else.

Just as I thought there was nothing left for us to do but wait for the archdemon to return, a powerful magical energy pulsed through the sky.

“What the hell?”

“The archdemon’s using Undivided Mind. You sent it so far away that it’s pulling out all the stops.”

The sky split. A black space opened up down the middle, a slash of void even darker than the night. The moon and stars disappeared behind it, as though pulled into the darkness that now seemed to break the very sky.

This is what Dark Magic looks like amplified by the power of Undivided Mind…

This time, the archdemon wouldn’t need a lengthy incantation. Rather, this summoning spell just ate up every stat of magical power pushed into it.

Should I do what Eris said? Should I fire another Bloody Ptarmigan Cross?

I looked down at the black bow, but Greed responded with silence. *“Make up your own mind,”* he seemed to say. I poured energy into the bow, and I felt more magical energy expanding from nearby. Eris felt it, too, and she turned toward its source.

“It’s coming from the top of the castle,” I said.

“Ah…it’s her. Fantastic timing. I have to give her that much.”

Even with my Night Vision skill engaged, I couldn't see her face. Then again, I didn't need to. Her white clothing flapping in the wind, her giant black axe…I'd recognize that silhouette anywhere. It was Myne, and she was late.

But if she's at the top of the castle, then…

Myne stared up into the sky, motionless. Then, without warning, she threw her axe into the clouds like a lance. She moved so fast, I could barely even trace the outline of the axe's trajectory. The atmosphere itself shook with a rumbling tremor, and in an instant, the expanding dark matter portal vanished. The night sky closed.

As it returned to normal, a black object fell from the clouds with enormous force. It landed not far from us, cratering the ground and sending shock waves through the Military District like an earthquake. In that crater lay the undead archdemon, crushed beneath a huge black axe. The monster was completely still, save for the twitching of its hands and feet.

The black axe Sloth grew heavier with each and every attack. That was its nature. I remembered then that Myne had been sparring with Aaron almost all day. Myne had apparently kept the weight amassed in the black axe since then. She had a bad habit of forgetting to reset Sloth's weight and leaving it somewhere on the manor grounds, where it would be completely immovable by anyone but her. Myne called it "theft deterrence." Given the now-twitching archdemon, I couldn't really fault the strategy. It still hurt to think of the damage she'd done to Barbatos Manor.

With these conflicting thoughts running through my head, I stared down at the archdemon.

"Well? How good did I get him?" asked Myne's familiar, emotionless voice as she emerged from the darkness.

"Myne… You're late," I said.

"Glad you finally made it," said Eris.

"I was sleeping, but Aaron woke me up." Myne approached to show me her forehead with a slight frown. "He hit me. It hurt."

Her forehead was indeed ever so slightly marred with a splash of red. I could imagine that when shouting had zero effect, Aaron must have resorted to more, uh, direct measures. According to Myne, that was exactly what he'd done. In a mad rush, Memil over his shoulder, he'd smacked Myne's forehead with the butt of his sword.

"But I forgave him," said Myne with the same flat intonation, "because it was an emergency."

"I see… I guess Aaron had a rough time too…"

Myne glanced at the spasming archdemon, then turned back to me with a bored face. "I'm disappointed it gave you so much trouble. What do you have to say for yourself, Lust? How could you let this happen?"

"It's just—it's been so *long* since I've been in an actual battle, and… I'm sorry." Driven by Myne's death glare, Eris shuffled away to hide behind me.

Myne looked over at the archdemon once more to confirm something for herself. "We have to sever the connection. Once we've done that, we can kill the undead archdemon. Fate, you have a technique perfectly suited for permanently killing an enemy that will not die by ordinary means. Use it."

Sever the connection, huh? In other words, with a single glance, Myne had realized the archdemon was possessed by some outside force—the source of the nightwalkers.

Chapter 23:
The Laplace Lineage

MYNE COULD ONLY BE talking about one thing: Greed's Second Level secret technique, Deadly Inferno. I had used it when Myne and I fought the chimera Haniel, a creature capable of healing so fast that it was essentially invincible. In that case, Myne's strength alone hadn't been enough to take it down. It was for that reason she'd asked me to help her.

In order to kill Haniel, I'd needed the Deadly Inferno attack. For it, I sacrificed 20 percent of my stats to Greed, and my scythe transformed, unlocking the ability to use the technique. The blades of the transformed scythe were filled with a curse so powerful, it corrupted even immortal opponents, rotting them from the first touch. However, the attack had to hit the enemy's weak point—the point where all their magical energy converged. It was from there that the scythe's curse flooded through the rest of the body, rendering even healing abilities useless against its decay. In other words, there was no room for error. If I missed, I would sacrifice 20 percent of my stats for nothing.

But in my half-starved state, as long as I concentrated, I could read the flow of magical energy in my opponent. Under ordinary circumstances, I didn't have this advantage.

I motioned for Myne and Eris to step away from the undead archdemon. Even now, the monster remained trapped beneath the weight of the black axe, writhing but unable to move. I focused energy into my right eye and read the flow of the archdemon's magical energy, which I followed to its source—the point on its forehead right between its two black horns. Fortunately, this part of the archdemon wasn't trapped under Sloth. We wouldn't have to worry about removing him, and therefore, we wouldn't have to worry about the archdemon attacking us again. Thus, I transformed the black bow into the black scythe.

"Greed, I'm giving you 20 percent of my stats. We'll use Deadly Inferno on Rafale. Call it a cremation, if you will."

"All right, but…are you sure you'll be okay? This is a soul in the Domain of E, you know…"

"I'll be fine. I'm not the person I was back in Galia."

After devouring the soul of the Divine Dragon, I'd almost lost my own soul to Gluttony. I had only been saved by Lady Roxy, who had brought my consciousness back from the brink. But I had to accept that since I bore a Skill of Mortal Sin, and that so long as the skill drove my hunger, I would never be able to walk away from battle. Furthermore, my enemies wouldn't always be weak, and some of them would be in the Domain of E. I had a feeling more such foes awaited me. In fact, I was certain of it.

As long as I was with other bearers of Mortal Sin like Myne and Eris, I would never be able to escape fighting such monsters—at least not now that

I had nearly reached their level. If I always waited for Lady Roxy to save me, then my own weak heart would forever leave me in danger of losing myself completely.

"I'm counting on you, Greed!"

"Ah, I can feel your commitment now. Very well. Allow me to feast upon those stats!"

As the stats drained from my body, the black scythe in my hand grew and transformed. It sprouted three long blades at its head, like the claws of a wild beast. With this newly enlarged scythe in hand, I turned toward the archdemon, the beast that had once been Rafale. "You let the power lead you astray—as I almost did, once…"

I had killed Hado Vlerick. He had played a role in sending Lady Roxy to Galia, and he had been kidnapping and killing orphans to satisfy his own twisted desires. I had despised him for that, as I had despised him for the five years during which he treated me as less than human.

Even so…I knew I shouldn't have killed him. Nobody had sentenced him to death. I had decided that I had the right to judge him purely on account of my newfound power. I now knew that such actions only brought sadness to the people most important to me. When I had told Aaron what I'd done, he had been unable to hide his feelings.

I'd told Roxy about it too, in the letter I left her in Galia. I'd told her how I killed Hado Vlerick. Told her I had destroyed the Hart estate's northern valley to slay a wild crowned beast—and that I'd let someone else take the blame. The lies had piled up one after another until there were too many to count. I'd wanted to be her strength, but I hadn't wanted her to know about Gluttony, and in the end, through all the lies, I had received my just desserts for my selfishness. The guilt had weighed so heavily on me as I wrote those words.

That was why, at the end of my letter, I told her that when I could live true to myself—when I could let go of my skull mask—I wanted to apologize to her once more, face to face.

But it wasn't pleasant, reckoning with my true self. The version of me that lived behind the skull mask whispered in a dark, heavy voice. In many ways, that voice felt like it belonged to my Gluttony.

Perhaps what lurked inside of me was what had lurked inside of Rafale. I had felt it eating through me since my return to Seifort. Aaron had noticed it. He'd tried to say something after I brutalized Lanchester. It had reared its head again while I snuck into the Vlerick research facility and lost myself to the horror of what took place within those walls. Greed had been the one to rescue the real Fate that time.

Now that I was in the Domain of E, I understood more than ever that no matter how strong you became, your humanity wasn't something you could maintain on your own. Great power could lead to great mistakes. At times like those, you needed friends and allies to guide you in the right direction. Because of them, although I held within me a fantastic power, my

heart remained unchanged. I was still the person I once had been. As obvious as it seemed, it was only now that I could recognize it myself.

"You said we were the same, didn't you, Rafale?" I asked.

The monster didn't seem aware that I was speaking to it. It didn't respond. I wondered if Rafale's soul was no longer within it. All the same, I went on.

"At the start, I think you were right. We both lived within our hate. You were me, and I was you. We truly were no different." I lifted the black scythe high above my head. "But let's end that now. Now…you are you, and I am me. Our connection ends here, Rafale, and I will keep moving on."

With that, I brought the scythe down upon this monster that was beyond the ability to understand human speech. Three deep lacerations tore open its head as if it had been clawed, and from those wounds, the curse took hold, blackening the monster's body. When the blackening entirely overtook the archdemon, its body crumbled to ash piece by piece.

Finally, a metallic voice rang in my head.

Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +6.10e8, Strength +6.30e8, Magic +9.30e8, Spirit +9.90e8, Agility +7.20e8. Skills added: Dark Magic, Undivided Mind.

I pushed down the wild ecstasy of Gluttony as it scrabbled through me, writhing at the taste of the Domain of E stats. As I did, I heard the voice of the girl who had once been the core of the chimera Haniel, Luna.

"Don't forget, Fate. I'm here, lending you my power…"

Her voice faded along with the pangs of Gluttony, and all that remained was the blood that poured from my right eye. Luna had helped me once again, controlling my Gluttony from the inside. She'd told me I had to do it myself, but…she'd also promised to fight alongside me, when we met in my dreams. The next time we met, in that dream world, I wouldn't forget to give her my thanks.

Greed's voice brought me out of my thoughts. *"It begins, Fate."*

A change of some kind was taking place in the archdemon. Its now-black stomach rapidly swelled, exploding when the corpse had expanded to its limit.

"Is…the connection broken?" I asked.

After the explosion, some thousand black bats poured out of it into the sky. I had expected something to escape from Rafale's—the archdemon's—body, but…how were we supposed to bring down an enemy of such numbers?

I cut at the bats with my scythe while Eris fired at them and Myne crushed them with her black axe, but we barely made a dent in the swarm. The bats were immortal, and whether we cut, shot, or squashed them, they regained their original form. Deadly Inferno wasn't an option either; each bat was a single monster unto itself, meaning I'd need to use the technique more than a thousand times to kill them all. My stats would drain long before I ever got there.

“What…what is this?”

Myne coolly crushed another bat under her axe. “This is the source of the nightwalkers, an unnatural swarm that lives as one being. It is the enemy that will lead me to what I am looking for.”

Myne glared at the mass of bats as one stray swept in to bite her. She caught the bat in her left hand and crushed it in her palm. The remaining bats whirled together, coalescing into a single form—the shape of a human boy. That figure held the black spear Vanity as though the weapon had never been taken from it.

“We meet again after *such* a long time, and yet you’re so cold to me!” the figure said. “And to think we were once such good friends, Myne. Or should I say…Wrath?”

The bats had gathered into the shape of a boy with white hair, his face split by a toothy grin.

Chapter 24:
Fate and Roxy

THE WHITE-HAIRED BOY spun the black spear Vanity in skillful circles, as though the weapon were an extension of his body. We readied our own weapons once more, preparing for an enemy whose power was completely unknown.

I wanted to use Identify, but I had a feeling he'd release magical energy of his own when I did. If that happened, I'd be blinded. In a battle against another person in the Domain of E, not only was the Identify skill pointless, it was potentially deadly.

We were locked in place, waiting to see how the young boy would move. Then he glanced at me like he would at an insect. "Hm…how many thousands of years has it been? One? Two? It couldn't have been four, could it? Time just goes so fast, doesn't it? Blink and you miss it. Don't you agree, Myne?"

"Shin. You're dead."

"Surely you've figured it out by now? I don't die. I hid a part of myself in this world. Then, when that worthless holy knight discovered me, I possessed him in order to resurrect myself. Yes, yes, I suppose you could say that relying on circumstance is a potential weak point in this process, but it worked out this time around. The proof's in the pudding, as they say: Here I am!"

In the next instant, the boy shattered into a flock of chittering bats, which swarmed to our sides before reforming. Shin spun his spear idly as he spoke. "Myne, I'm not the person I was then. Come back with me. Look at you. Lust can barely even use her own weapon, and Greed's only just made it to the Domain of E. None of you stand a chance against me."

"Shin…"

"Or would you prefer to try your luck? You'll understand how futile it is pretty quickly, I can tell you that." He flashed his glare at me, grin unrelenting. Both his eyes struck me with a pure, scarlet red.

Gah! What the hell is this?!

It was a terrible power, like my own when Gluttony overtook me with its full starvation. Eris and I were both trapped in that scarlet gaze, unable to move, barely even able to breathe under its power.

"Oh, my," said the boy. "I show a hint of real power and you two are frozen stiff! How totally pathetic." Shin frowned at Eris and me. He looked sincerely disappointed, like a boy who had been so looking forward to playing a new game only to realize he was stuck with an old partner.

Myne raised her axe in the air. "You will open the Door to Distant Lands for me."

"Ah, I see. So, you're still looking for that. But…I do quite like that about you!"

“Shin!”

In an instant, Myne closed in on Shin, splitting him in half from top to bottom. It was so quick, I wasn’t even sure it had happened. The two halves of Shin collapsed into a flock of bats before he appeared again, some distance from us.

“The same as always, I see. Always battle-ready. Very well, I’ll take you where you want to go. Come along. We’ll have to make a stop or two on the way, but we’ll end up at the door you want, I assure you. Well, shall we, Myne?”

Shin once again burst into his bat form, and the enormous flock flew toward the east. Myne glanced at me, her usually expressionless face now etched with a touch of loneliness as her brow creased ever so slightly. A single bat flew around her head in circles as though impatiently urging her along.

I was still frozen, unable to say a word. I wanted to tell her not to go, but I couldn’t move my mouth. My arms and legs also refused to move. It was proof of the overwhelming difference between Shin’s power and my own. I hated it. Myne had saved me countless times, and now I couldn’t even speak. I couldn’t stand the humiliation.

“My…ne…” I strained to break free of Shin’s spell. With everything I had, I called out to her, my voice rasping as it tried to break free.

As I did, the bat flew over to me. “Well, I must say I’m impressed,” the bat said, clearly amazed. “I’m going to have to rethink my opinion of you, Gluttony. But she won’t stop. She wouldn’t, even if you prayed for it. Everybody has something to live for, and for Myne, it’s that door. Well, so long. Perhaps we’ll meet again!”

“Myne…don’t go… Don’t go!”

I couldn’t help feeling like this was the beginning of something terrible. Like it was a truly horrible move for her to dive into this situation on her own. I’d thought we were friends—partners. I knew I was weak, but I wanted her to rely on me. To trust that I would grow stronger.

Myne turned once more toward me. Her eyes glistened with tears. I’d never seen that expression on her face before. It wasn’t the face of someone who had lived an extraordinarily long length of time. It was a face that finally matched her appearance—that of a young girl.

“Thank you for everything, Fate. Being together with you was the first time in so, so long that…I could just have fun.”

“Myne!”

“Forgive me.”

Myne headed east together with the last remaining bat. It was only a few seconds and then…they had both vanished. The sky over the kingdom once again filled with clouds, and snow fell silently around us.

Even after Shin’s curse broke, Eris and I stood in place as though we were still petrified by its power. My friend was gone, and she’d left for

reasons I never could have expected. I despised the powerlessness I'd felt in that moment. Was this how Lady Roxy had felt when I'd left her in Galia?

I cursed. "I'm so stupid…"

"Oh, so now you finally get it. But I guess that's in character, when you think about it." Greed's voice echoed through my Telepathy skill, but despite his words, I noticed a soft kindness to his tone.

Eris walked over to us, awkward and unsure of what to do or say. "What are you going to do now, Fate?"

"I'm heading back to Barbatos Manor. Aaron must be worried about us."

"You sure? You don't want to go chasing after Myne?"

"If I left in the heat of the moment, the same thing would happen all over again. Besides, I have my duties here. As the head of the Barbatos family."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Make sure to stay warm. It's gotten so cold today, we're lucky we didn't turn to ice."

Everywhere around us, snow was beginning to pile on the debris of the Military District. The warning sirens that had rung incessantly fell silent. The battle that had brought the kingdom to its knees was over. The night was over too, as the sun crept up from the east. No matter what happened the night before, that always marked the start of a brand-new day.

So *much* had happened. Too much, in fact. My heart was racing, but all the same…it was time to go home. I realized suddenly that there was no better feeling than simply knowing I had a home to go back to.

Eris walked with me to the Holy Knight District. The battle had been waged across so much of the kingdom, and soldiers and holy knights rushed by us hurriedly.

"They're not going to be using the Military District for quite some time, by the looks of it," said Eris.

"You talk like it's not your responsibility."

"Well, it's been under Envy's control for forever. It just doesn't feel very much like mine anymore."

"That reminds me! What's the story with that gunblade, anyway?"

In contrast to her usual elusive manner, Eris's face became earnest. As she spoke, she rested her hand on the finely decorated sheath in which the gunblade rested. "As you surely gathered from our battle just now, Envy is my Weapon of Mortal Sin. But quite some time ago, we had a pretty big falling-out. It was only because of everything that happened in Galia that we reunited and made up. Now the weapon is back where it belongs."

According to Eris, it all began when she and Envy had founded the kingdom of Seifort. After a few hundred years, they essentially broke up over a difference in moral values. As a result, Eris went wandering about on her own personal journey while Envy continued to rule the kingdom through its ability to possess bodies.

Shaken by Eris's disappearance, Envy became obsessed with the idea of finding the perfect body to wield it. This was where the seeds for Envy's scheme to create the human version of a crowned beast had been planted—a unique existence with its own unique title.

In order to see this plan to fruition, Envy had needed to stir enmity in the people of the kingdom from which to develop and grow the "hate" phenomenon. The weapon then waited for many long years as it fostered barely livable conditions for the general public under the oppression of the holy knights. When the hate from this treatment boiled to its limits, Envy attempted to kill the people's last remaining ray of hope: Lady Roxy Hart.

However I looked at it, I couldn't bring myself to just up and forgive the weapon. Even as the king of Seifort, there were limits to what could possibly be considered acceptable behavior. Envy had controlled the Divine Dragon, which meant that Envy was also responsible for the murder of Lady Roxy's father—as well as for Lady Roxy's own expedition to Galia.

My anger must have shown, because Eris looked at me apologetically. "I told Envy over and over again—what happened in Galia was its punishment for its oppression of the people of Seifort. Ideally, I'd break the weapon in half to make amends, but that's impossible. The thing's indestructible. What I *can* do is make sure it spends the rest of its time with me making up for its mistakes. After all, I was the one ignoring its little schemes."

Eris went on to tell me that she had been late catching up with us when we arrived in Seifort because she'd been trying to reconcile with the weapon. She'd arrived in the city before us and met with the gunblade, which had been recovered by that point.

"Please," I said, "I'm begging you. Be the ruler this kingdom deserves."

"Oh, I will. It's just…I get bored easily, you know?"

Just then, the two white-armored bodyguard knights ran up to Eris. They had a great number of things to report, and although at first she listened intently, after a time, she let out a yawn.

Is this really the person we should have on the throne? I sighed.

"I'm going to leave all that up to you guys," said Eris. "Just don't let me down, okay?"

"Understood!" said the two knights in unison. "We'll get to it immediately, Your Highness!"

I had expected more detailed instructions, but instead, Eris just left it all to her knights. She really *did* get bored easily. But the two knights seemed happy as they left; it looked like they enjoyed the chance to prove their worth through real, meaningful work.

Well, as long as she's making good use of the people underneath her, I guess.

"Those two have been responsible and trustworthy ever since they were little," Eris said, reading the worry on my face but responding with a

confident grin. “They’ll be fine. I mean, sometimes they’re actually *too* good at following orders, I think.”

I sensed immediately she was talking about their role under their old king, Envy. The weapon’s bid to create an all-new type of human had been a profoundly large-scale experiment that required a vast, deliberate effort to nurture hate over generations of oppressing the population. Lady Roxy, beloved by everyone, had been key to it all—and I’d broken the entire experiment by saving her.

“But…it’s my fault too,” said Eris. “We might find the idea laughable, but Envy was completely serious. He fully intended to find a replacement for me, even if he had to make it himself.” Her world-weary tone made it sound like the longer you lived, the more life became a mountain of mistakes. “That’s why I want to make this kingdom more hospitable—more worth living in—for everyone.”

“Can I trust you?”

“Of course. In fact, I’ll make today a day where everyone can eat as many sweets as they like!”

“Uh…what? Why even do that?”

“Because eating sweets makes people happy.”

“In a mere two sentences, you’ve completely destroyed my faith in the future of this kingdom.”

“What?! But it’s a fantastic idea!”

How does she not get this? Although I supposed sweets really *would* make things more bearable. More importantly, her two white knights seemed genuinely reliable.

As I grappled Eris off me, we made our way to Barbatos Manor, where a large number of people had gathered. I spotted Aaron, the barkeep from my local tavern, and all the servants of Hart Manor. Then I noticed a girl among them. She walked toward me confidently, her golden hair swaying in the wind. She was exactly as I remembered her. “Lady Roxy…”

Eris seemed to sense what was coming and released me, and she waited at a slight distance.

I didn’t know what to say as Roxy and I walked toward one another, but I couldn’t stop myself. Was she sad? Was she angry? What would she have to say to me? A maelstrom of thoughts stormed in my head as we stood in front of one another, looking into each other’s eyes.

I knew I had to say something… I opened my mouth to speak, and in that instant, her face filled with a smile so lovely, it left me completely mesmerized.

"Welcome home, Fate," she said, her three words washing away all my worries.

"Lady Roxy…"

Lady Roxy shook her head. "No, no, that won't do at all. You're a holy knight now, and the head of the Barbatos family, no less. You don't need to use 'lady' anymore."

She was right. I was no longer a gatekeeper, nor was I a servant to the Hart family. I wasn't the secretive adventurer Corpse either. I was a holy knight, just like she was. I was in her debt no longer, and I wanted to hold my head high, like Greed was always telling me to.

"Roxy, I'm sorry…that I never told you. I kept so much from you, and I caused you so much trouble…"

"I'm not looking for an apology, Fate. You've always fought for the people important to you. It saddened me to learn of what happened to Hado Vlerick, but I too shoulder some responsibility for that outcome…"

"That's not true! It was my selfishness…and it was because…"

I couldn't say more, because Roxy had wrapped me in a hug. "We're human, Fate, and we make mistakes. Not just you, but me too. I lost troops in Galia. My own soldiers. Each one broke my heart, and I wondered if I could have done things differently to save them. But life is too difficult, too heavy, if we only ever focus on our regrets. I can see it in your face, Fate. You bear that weight now, and it's crushing you,"

Roxy let go of me for a moment to look me in the eyes. "So let me say it one more time. Welcome home, Fate."

Tears welled in my eyes, and they fell down my face. These words, and these feelings, were ones I wanted to speak from the bottom of my heart, because it had taken me much too long to get here. "I'm glad to be home, Roxy."

"And you'll always have a home here, Fate."

If only I'd been able to open my heart to Roxy earlier. Even so, Roxy had accepted everything I was. I would make mistakes in the future, but mistakes were proof of my humanity, and so I would carry them with me.

"Um… Are we done here yet, or what?"

Eris's voice cut through the air and brought me back to my senses. How long had Roxy and I been gawping at one another? When I looked around, I saw Aaron, the barkeep, and all the Hart family servants staring at us in anticipation of what would happen next.

We'd been completely lost in our own little world, but now I saw Roxy's face turning red, and I felt mine doing the same. At the same time, there was something nice about that shy embarrassment, as though my wandering heart had found a place to rest.

Chapter 25:
The End of the Vlericks

IN THE END, we had to delay repairs to Barbatos Manor on account of the battle with Rafale. The carpenter we'd intended to hire was working on rebuilding the Military District. Little by little, the district recovered from the scars of battle, and the damaged facilities returned to their former glory. That is, everything except for what had once belonged to the Vlerick family.

Those ghastly, horrific facilities were to be destroyed after Eris and her white knights investigated the remains. Rafale's mother was removed from the glass cylinder where she was kept and carefully transported to the Seifort graveyard, where she could be laid to rest.

I returned to the facility myself, to see once more what Rafale had done in that place. During our battle, I had seen the room where I found Lina Vlerick, but I discovered others like it. All of them had belonged to Rafale's father. The things he had done in those rooms could only be called inhuman, and they made me sick to my stomach.

One floor above, I discovered the room Rafale himself must have used. It was, perhaps ominously, located directly above his mother's remains. On the wall hung a painting of a young Rafale, smiling in the arms of his mother. The shelves were full of materials relating to the research of Galian artifacts. He must have done his work and research in that place every day.

After the white knights had collected and taken the research materials, all that remained were the diaries that Rafale had written in his childhood. I took one in hand and opened it up. A shiver of fear ran down my spine.

"Rafale…you…damn it…"

It was a record of the path that had twisted him into the monster he became. It started with entries about peaceful days with his mother, but all too soon, those entries stopped. When they began again, they spoke of suffering and pain—presumably from the time when Rafale's mother died.

However, the young Rafale didn't know his mother had in truth been killed by his own father. Instead, his father lied and said she had died of a plague. Ostensibly because of a fear that she would infect others, the young Rafale had not been allowed to say a final goodbye. The reality was, of course, that Lord Vlerick had moved his dead wife's corpse into a glass cylinder.

Then, when Rafale turned twenty, he saw his father with a young woman. Suspicious of this behavior, he followed the pair to the Vlerick facility in the Military District. There, he saw Lord Vlerick kill the girl and place her body into a glass cylinder filled with liquid—all done as though the girl was a piece of art he wished to enjoy viewing.

And the girl was not alone. The room housed dozens of similar bodies, each kept in their own cylinder. Among them was the mother whom Rafale had adored, still as young as he remembered her.

The diary essentially stopped after Rafale made this discovery. All that remained were messy lines scribbled in rage. I placed the record back on the bookshelf and put the facility behind me. All of it would be destroyed, once the bodies trapped within were finally laid to rest.

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The following day, I woke to the sound of chirping birds and tidied my messy hair in the mirror. Roxy had invited me to visit Hart Manor, and I didn't want to embarrass myself as the head of the Barbatos family. I quickly got dressed and took Greed from his resting place on the wall.

"Looking motivated, Fate," said the black sword.

"Of course. Today's a big day."

Greed laughed. "Finally a little light shining on your face. It's nice. You've been so doom and gloom recently, you know?"

"Shut it, Greed."

"I guess we've got that young lady to thank, huh? But are you sure about this? Your Gluttony has entirely different thoughts about her, you know."

"I know. But I don't want to lie to myself anymore. I have to be me."

"I see… Well, I guess it's up to you then."

"Let's get going already."

I'd told Roxy about my Gluttony, and even then, she still wanted to be with me. The way she said it had made me feel like an idiot for ever worrying about explaining myself. I had always carried my Gluttony by myself, as my own problem. But I felt that maybe, just maybe, with Roxy by my side, there might be another way.

"Recently, I've been thinking I want to live a little more carefreely. Like you, Greed."

"I'm always stone-cold serious."

"Oh, sure!"

How many times had I heard Greed say "because I'm a weapon" to shirk responsibility? The weapon was about as carefree—and irresponsible—as they came.

"Shouldn't you hurry up, Fate? Aaron is probably waiting. Old men, they tend to be early risers."

"I'm going, I'm going."

I left my room and headed down the stairs at the center of the manor. As expected, Aaron was indeed waiting.

"Sorry I'm late, Aaron."

"Not at all. I got here early. Ah, that's right—the Vlerick family's punishment has been decided."

"What's going to happen to them?"

“They were stripped of their rank, and all their assets were seized. They’ve been crushed, essentially. …But I’ve been thinking that I might take in Memil. The girl quite literally has nowhere left to go.”

“Wait, you mean you intend to adopt her?!” I couldn’t believe it. Wouldn’t that make Memil my…little sister?

Aaron smiled and nodded. “Yes, but even if I do, she won’t be able to call herself a holy knight.”

“But she’d be one of our family…”

“Yes, and I’ve already decided what duties I’d like her to perform instead. We’ll have her act as a servant. A maid, I suppose.”

I was bewildered. “She really doesn’t strike me as the servant type, Aaron.”

“Well, we won’t know until we give her a chance. And she does seem to genuinely regret what happened with her brother. I’d like to take her under my wing and help her down the road to a new life.”

So now Memil wouldn’t just be my sister—she’d also be the Barbatos family maid. I had this feeling she’d be like no other maid I’d ever met. I could already imagine her coming to wake me up with a morning greeting along the lines of “Ew, how disgusting. It’s time to wake up, maggot.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any time to reconsider?” I asked.

“Indeed, no. But there’s no need to worry, Fate. She’ll turn over a new leaf. It’s nothing for you to be afraid of.”

“And she won’t stomp on my face to wake me up while I’m sleeping, will she?”

“What on earth? Do you…desire that, Fate?!”

“You know what? Just forget I said anything. It’s nothing.”

Aaron then informed me that Memil would be coming to the manor the following day. Maybe it was for the best. Now that Myne was gone, it was just me and Aaron. Another person would hopefully brighten the place up a bit. Aaron had treated Myne like she was his own daughter. Once he heard she was gone, it had hit him quite hard. Sometimes I caught him muttering about having lost what little joy remained in his life.

Either way, it was my duty to welcome Memil to our family. After all, I’d killed her brothers. I was sure she had her own thoughts and feelings about moving in with me too. But if she was joining the Barbatos family, then I owed it to her as both the head of the family and her brother to watch over her.

“I’ll look forward to seeing her when she arrives,” I said.

“Thank you, Fate. Well, shall we go?”

“Yes.”

When we opened the manor door, we found a woman waiting for us at the gates. Hers was a face I knew all too well. It was filled with a gentle kindness and looked remarkably like Roxy’s. I ran to greet her.

“Lady Aisha? What are you doing here?”

“Oh? Should I not be? Now that I’m feeling so much better, I wanted to spend a day out in the kingdom.”

“A day out?!”

“Well, actually, I only just arrived. Even Roxy doesn’t know.”

“You kept your journey to the kingdom a secret?!”

“I did. Oh, Roxy will be absolutely bowled over, don’t you think? You know, I haven’t even informed her of my recovery yet! I wanted to tell her in person, you see.”

First Memil, now Lady Aisha. On top of that, Lady Aisha wanted her arrival to be a surprise for her daughter, and I could tell by the cheeky, devilish look on her face that she intended to rope me into her plan. I was frozen in place as my mind rushed to catch up, so Lady Aisha turned to Aaron.

“Why, if it isn’t Lord Aaron! It’s been more than a decade!”

“Aisha, it’s always a pleasure. I dare say you’ve grown even prettier since we last met.”

“Oh, Aaron. I see you haven’t lost that silver tongue of yours.”

Lady Aisha was in high spirits, and she tapped me on the shoulder excitedly as she spoke. She really was back to full health, so I was glad, but…perhaps she was still a little *too* energetic? In any case, because our visit to Hart Manor was fast approaching, the three of us put our heads together and devised a plan Lady Aisha dubbed “The Great Daughterly Surprise.”

Chapter 26:
Roxy's Invitation

THE PLANNING BEGAN when Lady Aisha dragged Aaron and me to a corner of the Barbatos grounds.

"We're going to surprise Roxy. That is our mission!" she said, standing tall with her chest puffed out confidently.

"Uh…"

Seeing my apprehension, Lady Aisha turned to scold me. "You won't get anywhere with my daughter with that attitude. Show some spirit!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

The all-too-energetic Lady Aisha proceeded to list off her plan, with me as her captive audience. Aaron grinned like he was enjoying some great piece of theater, but he soon found himself roped into Lady Aisha's mission as well.

"Aaron, we'll be counting on you for your full support, you hear?"

"Yes…yes, of course. I'll support the mission to the best of my abilities." In this way, Aaron found himself dragged up from the audience to join the cast on stage. At least the success of the play was on both of our shoulders now.

"Stage one is simple: Meet with Roxy and just have a good time. Chat, enjoy yourselves, and get her relaxed and comfortable."

"Uh, Lady Aisha? Surely you know me well enough to know that the difficulty level is already very high."

"What are you talking about? You're the head of the Barbatos family now, so please put your conversational skills to good use and steal my daughter's heart!"

"Uh…" In all my time alive, I'd rarely had much of a chance to speak with women. Up until now, I could quite literally count the women I'd had full non-professional conversations with on a single hand: Lady Aisha, Roxy, Myne, Eris… I silently dropped to my knees in despair. This was bad.

"Lonely…Fate is so lonely…so very lonely…" came a voice from the black sword.

"Shut up, Greed," I whispered.

"Really don't think you should count Myne and Eris either, seeing as they're your peers. So more accurately, your experience with women is at a grand total of two!"

"Oh, give it a rest, Greed!"

The black sword was enjoying this way too much. I felt like stabbing him into the earth and calling him a new art installation on the manor grounds. After a moment's thought, that's exactly what I did: I stabbed him into the ground between the roots of the great tree we had gathered under. "Wait here and be quiet for a while."

"Oi! Come on, Fate! It was just a figure of speech!"

“Which part of calling me lonely and making fun of my inexperience is a figure of speech?! Think about that for a while!”

“Wait, Fate! Wait—don’t do this. I want to go to the party too! Think about it! How do you honestly expect to show Roxy a good time on your own?”

Well, Greed did have a point there. We’d been together long enough for him to know all my weaknesses. I realized I didn’t have much choice other than to bring him. I jimmied Greed out of the ground and sheathed him, then realized Lady Aisha had been waiting for me the whole time.

“Do you mind if we continue with the mission plan, Fate?”

“Of course. But as I’m sure you’re well aware, I’m, uh…very inexperienced.”

“I see…in that case, Aaron, I’d like you to teach him your ways. Oh, yes, I’ve heard tell of the smooth-talking, high-flying ladies’ man you once were.”

Aaron awkwardly tried to shrug off her words with a laugh, but even now, there was a kind of rustic charm to the old man. I could only imagine how much more appealing he must have been at a younger age.

“Aaron,” I said, “does that mean you had to fight the girls off you when you were younger?”

“I, uh…I don’t know if I would go *quite* that far…”

But you won’t completely deny it?! I began rattling off a list of what trouble I imagined dashing young Aaron had gotten into but was promptly told to cut it out.

“By the time I understood the world, I was already betrothed! And I’ve never given my heart to anyone aside from my beloved wife. Back then, people just started spreading rumors because I had a, er, playful spirit.”

“The Legend of the Young Aaron. You have to tell me about that some time!” I insisted.

“Let’s not go calling it a legend, all right? But, uh…if it’s advice you’re looking for, then I’d say you just have to be yourself. If you try to be anything else, something will feel off.”

“Got it. I’ll do my best, then.”

At least the target was Roxy. It wasn’t like I had to hold a conversation with somebody I didn’t even know. I had a feeling I could make this work. After all, if the Great Daughterly Surprise Mission had never popped up, I would’ve been on my way to Hart Manor with barely a worry at all.

“Lady Aisha, exactly how are you planning to get the jump on Roxy, anyway?”

“I am glad you asked…”

Aisha informed us of what she had in mind for Roxy with an air of great secrecy. The strategy was by no means wildly innovative, but Lady Aisha knew her daughter well, and she had the perfect plan for her sharp-eyed daughter.

In the end, Lady Aisha stayed at Barbatos Manor while Aaron and I went on ahead. She would swan in later.

The gates to Hart Manor were already open when we arrived. We'd been told in advance to let ourselves in, so we passed through without so much as a second thought. We made our way through the exquisitely kept gardens and came to the fountain at the center of the grounds.

I looked around from where we stood and saw that a great number of people had gathered at the western terrace. All of them were busy as Roxy directed the placement of food throughout the area with military precision. It was about time for the party to start, but I thought maybe we should wait, and I looked toward Aaron.

We both knew that if we headed to the terrace now, we'd only get in the way. At the same time, that left us at a loss as to what to do. Right at that moment, the manor's head servant arrived, her glasses glinting in the light of the sun. This woman had been a huge help to me when I reported to her, and she had even given me a large sum of money when I'd told her I was quitting to follow Roxy to Galia.

"Lord Aaron, Lord Fate, welcome. We've been expecting you," she said, bowing deeply.

I knew our positions had changed since we last met, but it was still hard for me to accept the distance between us now. "It's been a long time," I said. "I have to thank you for your help. Because of the money you gave me, I made it to Galia safely."

"I'm happy to hear it. However…I never could've imagined that the Fate I knew would return to Seifort quite like you did. I look forward to hearing about your future endeavors."

It was nice to see that the strictest formalities went only so far as her first bow. She was still the same woman I remembered. She then turned to Aaron and once again bowed deeply.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Aaron. I am Haru, the head servant of Hart Manor. It's an honor to make your acquaintance."

"And you, too, Haru. I must admit, I'm quite envious of Roxy. I could only dream of having such a beautiful, well-mannered head servant to brighten up my own manor."

"I…please, stop, my lord. You must be joking…"

I couldn't believe it. The head servant was always completely focused on her work, yet here she was all flushed and awkward like an ordinary young woman. The so-called woman of steel was…melting?

But having traveled with Aaron for so long, I'd started to see that no matter who we talked to, the old man showered them in compliments. The vast majority of women responded quite favorably to him, and it made me wonder if such behavior heralded the return of the legendary Lady-Killer Aaron.

"Um…Haru?" I said gently. "Would you mind showing us to the terrace now?"

“O-oh…but of course. My humblest of apologies. Right this way.”

Her face was still flushed, and it seemed Aaron’s compliment had left her somewhere on cloud nine. Was she embarrassed to have forgotten her duties, even if just for an instant? I could have found out through my Telepathy skill, but I didn’t want to make a fuss by touching her, so I simply watched on with fascination.

“Would you kindly stop staring, my lord?”

“Oh, my apologies.”

It seemed I’d been watching a little too carefully, and Greed wasn’t about to let me forget it.

“Idiot! Now you’ve made her mad!” Greed said gleefully, cackling.

“Yeah, yeah. If you want to laugh, go ahead and laugh,” I muttered.

That’s exactly what the black sword did. Unceasingly.

“Would you please quit it already?”

With Haru guiding us, we approached the terrace where Roxy waited. She wore a beautiful white dress, and she smiled as we neared. Around her neck, the light of a blue pendant danced in the rays of the sun.

Chapter 27:
A Carefree Happiness

I WAVED AT ROXY as we walked toward her, and she gave a timid wave of her own in return. She came down from the terrace to meet us and thanked Haru for bringing us over.

"Welcome, Fay and Lord Aaron," she said with a bright, heartfelt smile. "I'm so happy you could make it."

I was so taken by Roxy's beauty that Aaron elbowed me in the ribs to bring me back. "Thank you for inviting us," I choked out.

"I'm relieved the weather evened out. It sometimes feels like the winter snow will never end."

We really were lucky. The sky above was a pristine blue, and the thick gray clouds of the day before felt like little more than a dream. Even though winter had only just begun, and the winds of spring wouldn't arrive for some months yet, we were blessed with a pleasantly warm day.

"The day before yesterday, it snowed so much that Aaron and I were stuck outside shoveling snow all day."

"Really?" Roxy asked, her head tilted just so. "Do you plan to hire servants at Barbatos Manor?"

I thought it best to leave the answer to this particular question in Aaron's hands. He smiled gently and spoke without any hesitation. "Well, actually, I'm adopting Memil Vlerick into our family."

"Memil Vlerick?! Really?!" Roxy looked just as stunned as I had, but there was a hint of happiness in her face as well. As it grew, Roxy nodded. "It's just like you to do something like that, my lord. I think it's a wonderful idea."

"I do hope the two of you will get along," Aaron said. "It's just Fate and myself at Barbatos Manor, and well, we both know how Fate is with people…"

"Yes, Fay is, well…he's always been like that. I'll do my best to patch things up with Memil on my side as well."

"You have my thanks, Roxy."

The atmosphere was so relaxed, and I was relieved to hear both of them making a promise to support Memil in the future. Although I really did think it was wonderful, my mind had caught on something else. "Roxy, I'm really happy to hear you'll help us support Memil. But, uh, what do you two mean about me being 'like that'?"

"Hm. Lord Aaron, would you help me explain?"

"Hm. Yes. Well, Fate, when it comes to these things, you've just always been this way."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," said Roxy.

"In any case, shall we move along?"

Roxy and Aaron both walked off toward the terrace. Haru glanced at me with a sigh before heading after them.

What do they mean "that way"? Even Haru seems to get it! The only one left to ask was Greed. We'd traveled far and wide together, and even if he was arrogant and bigheaded, he was usually reliable when it came to these kinds of things. "Hey, Greed," I said, placing a hand on my sword. "What were Roxy and Aaron talking about back there?"

"Fate, it's just that... Well, when it comes to some things, you are who you are, you know? I really thought you'd grown up a bit, but I guess not."

"Damn it, not you too!"

"Now's not the time to get down in the dumps about this. Roxy's calling for you."

I just had to hope that whatever it was that made me *that way*, I would grow out of it on the battlefield. Or perhaps I was missing something? I felt quite concerned about it, but today was Roxy's day, not mine—the party was hers. I hurried to the terrace where Roxy now stood only to run into a person suddenly standing between us: a young girl with a head of chestnut-colored hair.

Wait, I've seen this girl before—Miria!

I'd met Miria in Galia when I was still hiding my identity behind my skull mask. I'd found myself traveling with Roxy and her troops when we realized we shared a destination. Back then, Miria had painted a target on my back for getting too close to Roxy, and she'd attacked me wildly with her magical blade, a flamberge. All those old memories came flooding back as she once again…attacked me wildly with her magical blade, that same old flamberge.

"Never in a hundred years did I expect to see Lich-Face Skull-Man again!" she cried. "And not here, of all places! I don't care if you're the head of the Barbatos family—anyone who tries to get between me and my beloved Lady Roxy will not be forgiven!"

"Whoa! Be careful with that thing!" I cried.

I couldn't believe she would attack me with exactly the same ferocity as she had in the battle-scarred lands of Galia—from which we were a long, long way. Miria hadn't matured at all since we last saw each other, and it was clear she had a one-track mind whenever it came to her commander. That said, her bladework had significantly improved. Miria's fiery sword traced sharp lines left and right. As I ducked and wove around them, her frustrated retorts came flying.

"You're dodging too much! At least let me hit you a couple of times!" she snapped.

"What?! You do know I'm here because I was invited, right? Can't we just learn to get along already?"

"Anyone who tries to steal Lady Roxy is my mortal enemy!"

"Mortal enemy?!"

Miria's flaming blade came searing down from the sky, and I caught it between my hands. I was in the Domain of E, which Miria had yet to reach, so none of her attacks had any real effect. On top of that, I had the Fire Resistance skill, so in that sense, I actually *was* Miria's natural enemy, if not her mortal one.

"Hey! No fair! You're…too strong…"

"Now that you understand, will you please give up?"

"I'll never give up!"

Miria hadn't changed a bit. It looked like I had no choice but to take her weapon to render her powerless. Then Mugan appeared, who for all intents and purposes was Miria's babysitter. An imposing figure with a well-built physique, he had the air of a man who'd seen his fair share of battle. He was another member of the kingdom's army, and I'd met him when I met Miria, on my way to the vast canyon of Galia.

Mugan moved with practiced experience, scruffing Miria by the back of her collar and hefting her up into the air.

"Don't ruin things just when we're about to get to the good bit!" Miria shouted.

"*You're* going to ruin Lady Roxy's party if you don't calm down!" Mugan shouted back.

Miria's shoulders slumped in Mugan's grip.

"It's been a while, Mugan," I said.

"Sure has. I see you've finally shucked that skull mask of yours. Was quite something to discover you're the Barbatos family head! Ah, where are my manners—I ought to be more polite when I speak to the head of one of the esteemed families."

"It's fine, it's fine—I'd much prefer you to speak to me like you always have."

"Ha! Works for me. By the look of things, that was quite the battle you had in the Military District."

"Fortunately, we managed to keep the damage confined to just that district. Oh, wait a second—your daughter works in the Military District, doesn't she? Is she okay?"

Unfortunately, the Military District had seen its share of casualties during the battle. The facilities surrounding the battleground had endured the greatest losses, but others had been besieged by escaped nightwalkers. I didn't think I'd be able to forgive myself if I found out Mugan's daughter was among the fallen.

But Mugan bellowed with laughter. "It's a bit embarrassing, but Laine—that's my daughter—was so caught up in her own research, she didn't even realize a battle was going on outside her door!"

"I'm glad to hear she's safe, but, uh, I'm impressed by her focus. That was quite the fight, and the warning sirens were practically deafening."

“She’s a researcher through to her bones, I guess. Especially when it comes to Galian relics and artifacts. Kind of wish she’d get married and settle down, though…”

Mugan then produced a rope from somewhere and quickly bound Miria with it so she wouldn’t go doing anything rash. As he did, the very subject of our conversation appeared by her father’s side.

“Are you playing with Miria again, Papa?”

Laine had a head of long, wavy red hair, and the eyes of someone who needed a little more sleep. Even though she was at a party, she wore a white lab coat, like she was ready to jump straight back into her research at any given moment.

“Laine! I don’t know if I’d call it play. It’s more like I just caught someone making a nuisance at Lady Roxy’s party and I’m making sure they can’t do it again. Consider it an official duty, like taking people to the dungeons—that kind of thing.”

“No way!” cried Miria, her face suddenly the definition of fear. “You don’t mean it, do you, Mugan?”

“Mean it? I always say what I mean. Now let’s go. Unfortunately, there’s no dungeon in the manor, but you and me are going to have a talk about things.”

“Nooo!”

With Miria hefted over his shoulder, Mugan headed away from the terrace. Roxy had gone to all the trouble of inviting them, and now I couldn’t help but wonder exactly why they had even come at all. Perhaps it was nothing out of the ordinary for them; it seemed like just another regular day.

I headed off once more for Roxy, who was still waiting, but Laine suddenly grabbed my elbow.

“That black sword…” she said. “It’s a Weapon of Mortal Sin, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“Ah, it is. Just as I thought. I have the Telepathy skill, and…oh. You do too.”

Her sleepy face hadn’t changed, even as she used her Telepathy to peek into my thoughts. She’d caught me so off guard that my own Telepathy set off, and Laine’s thoughts seeped into my own.

This is the first time I’ve ever conversed with another person via Telepathy, she said. It’s such a strange sensation. I must say, though, I’m very interested in your black sword… And in you. I’d love it if you could visit my laboratory some time. I’ll give you the address…

Laine then pushed a map into my hand with directions to her laboratory and disappeared off in the direction her father had just gone. Unlike Mugan, who wore his heart on his sleeve, there was something mysterious and slightly intimidating about Laine. However, her research was on Galian relics, and I didn’t want to miss the chance to talk to her about them. Greed, Eris, and Myne were all keeping things from me. I got the feeling that they wanted me to work it out on my own, but still.

In any case, that would all have to wait. I turned from the fading silhouette of Laine and headed once more for Roxy and the others at the terrace.

“I was beginning to think you wouldn’t make it, Fate,” said Roxy. “I was getting worried.”

“All these distractions are a bad habit,” added Aaron.

“Did you actually see what just happened there? I was literally attacked by a flaming sword…”

Aaron and Roxy burst out laughing as I struggled to make a case for myself.

“Don’t worry,” said Roxy, “I’ll make sure to scold Miria for her bad behavior later.”

“Are you sure that’s going to work? Miria likes you so much, I think she’ll probably just love the attention.”

“That’s a bit unfair, I think. I’ll have you know that I led the kingdom’s army into Galia not so long ago. There’s a certain skull-masked adventurer who could tell you all about that.”

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think I’m in a position to question your methods.”

When I’d met Roxy in Galia, it had been not as Fate but as Corpse, an adventurer who traveled and fought behind a skull mask. The mask had the ability to hide my identity from those around me, but even then, when we had traveled together, Roxy had noticed Corpse’s mannerisms were awfully similar to Fate’s. I remembered sweating nervously the entire time. The fact that we could joke about it now suggested that I’d come to terms with it all.

As Roxy and I laughed at our little joke, Aaron left to greet some old friends while Haru walked off to ensure the other guests were seen to and served.

“I guess we’re on our own now,” said Roxy. “Shall we get something to eat?”

“You know, I caught the scent of something delicious earlier, and I can’t seem to get it off my mind. Is it a barbecue?”

“It is! On our expedition to Galia, we enjoyed them all the time. We didn’t have particularly good ingredients, but it was such fun to gather around and eat together. I knew that when I finally came back, I wanted to do it again.” She seemed so very pleased with herself, and she leaned in to whisper in my ear. “Actually, Haru opposed the idea because it’s winter and it’s cold, but I forced the issue.”

“That sounds like the Roxy I know.”

Skewers of meat and vegetables sat upon metal netting, glistening and popping with fat as they cooked over the fire. Roxy passed one to me fresh off the grill, and I stuffed it into my mouth.

“This is fantastic! It’s just the right amount of salt and spices!”

“Really?! That makes me so glad!”

It turned out that Roxy herself had prepared all the ingredients for the barbecue. I was amazed because I’d never known her to do any cooking. She’d been far too busy with her duties as a holy knight. After she became the Hart family head following her father’s death, it seemed like her life had been a series of trips back and forth between the manor and the castle.

The fact that Roxy could indulge in cooking now was at least a sign that she was making time for herself. It was also likely thanks to Eris, the newly reinstated ruler of Seifort. Eris wasn’t at Roxy’s party, but I hoped to thank her the next chance I got.

“I’ve been practicing a lot recently,” said Roxy. “Let me make something for you next time we meet.”

“That sounds great. All I know how to do is grill and simmer meats. That’s about it.”

“I know meat is your favorite, so how about I try making cabbage rolls?”

“Really? I literally can’t wait!”

I didn’t even know when it would happen, but I was already imagining Roxy’s cabbage rolls. I bet they would be prepared with the same delicate deliciousness as the barbecue I was currently enjoying. As Roxy and I went on tasting from the barbecue selection, I heard Greed’s voice echo in my head.

“Looks like you could have left me stuck under that tree after all. You’re doing just fine on your own.”

“Thanks, Greed,” I said.

“All right, hold up, Fate. Let’s not get all sappy and start talking gratitude all of a sudden.”

“It’s just how I feel.”

It seemed to me that feelings came in different colors, and happiness was perhaps the most vibrant of the bunch. I felt like my heart had been

painted in a vast array of different shades—blacks, reds, blues, and more. But if I wanted to keep the colors I had when I was with Roxy, there was something I needed to do. I had to rid myself of the Gluttony skill that continued to eat away at everything within me. It was a task that Greed's previous owner—a prior bearer of Gluttony—had failed.

However, Greed hadn't called the task impossible. The black sword was a mouthy braggart, but he didn't lie. That meant there was hope for me yet.

Chapter 28:
Out in the Open

ROXY AND I ENDED UP moving to a quiet spot a little way from the party. As the conversation flowed, the topic shifted to Aaron. I regaled Roxy with the tale of our first encounter, when I discovered Aaron's little village entirely by accident on the way to Galia. Back then, the village had been a last resort for people with nowhere else to go. Aaron and I had never met before that day, but I'd sparked something inside of him, and he'd gone so far as to teach me the fundamentals of swordsmanship.

As I told the story, Roxy had a smirk on her face like she knew something I didn't. "I've heard this before, you know."

"Eh?"

"Next, the two of you defeat the lich lord and free Hausen, right?"

"What?! But how? Oh, wait—oh, now I see…"

Roxy giggled. "Took you long enough."

Not long after I'd left Hausen for Galia, Roxy had discovered the estate in the midst of reconstruction. Naturally, she'd met Aaron as well. She'd said as much herself when we crossed swords in Galia, right before she showed me that Aaron had taught her how to charge her sword with the power of the Grand Cross technique.

Roxy puffed her cheeks with mock dissatisfaction at my slowness, but she broke into another grin moments later. "Aaron didn't say anything about me when you met him after Galia?"

"Not a thing! He's not really the sort to share a lot about himself."

"That's true. Well, if he won't tell you, I'm more than happy to."

Roxy had stopped by to help with Hausen's repairs for a bit, but Aaron had taken it upon himself to initiate her into the true art of the holy sword. However, it hadn't been easy for Roxy to learn. During her struggles to control the new power, another lich lord had appeared in the streets of Hausen.

"There was a second crowned beast?!" I yelped. "Aaron never said a thing!"

"Well, that's Lord Aaron for you. But it wasn't a crowned beast, to be clear, just a lich lord. We defeated it with a special technique you yourself taught Aaron. Do you know what it was?"

I suddenly felt like a student being quizzed by a teacher. It really sounded like I was supposed to know the answer. I didn't want to embarrass myself. I thought carefully, but the only thing that came to mind was the time Aaron and I had combined our attacks into a single blast.

"Did you layer your Grand Cross charges into a Double Grand Cross?"

"Bingo! Aaron was quite impressed with you, you know. He said that because holy knights so often fight alone, he'd never even imagined such combinations were possible. I was impressed as well."

“Stop, you’re embarrassing me! It wasn’t that big of a discovery…”

“Why don’t we try it together next time?”

Roxy’s eyes bored into me with the weight of expectation. I suddenly realized that she was incredibly close. I couldn’t even fumble a proper reply.

“You don’t want to?” Roxy asked.

“No, no, that’s not it at all!” I stammered.

“Then let’s do it. Why don’t we try it out right here? You’ve already got your blade, so I’ll just dash off to grab my holy sword.”

“What?! We’ll terrify the whole party if we do it right here!”

Roxy had already jumped up to dash off. As I scrambled up to stop her, she turned to me with a satisfied look and stuck her tongue out. “Just kidding! You really fall for everything, don’t you, Fay?”

“You got me again.”

Ever since my time as her servant, I’d been caught up in Roxy’s pranks and jokes. But I hadn’t expected them to continue even *after* I became the head of the Barbatos family. Even so, it was like back in the old days when we were first getting to know each other. I liked it.

“How *is* the restoration of Hausen going?” Roxy asked.

“Smoothly so far. I enlisted the help of an adventurer I know who goes by the name of Baldo. He leads a group of fifty or so adventurers, and they’re in charge of security, so at least we don’t have to worry about monster attacks. A childhood friend of mine, Set, is establishing and managing trade relations for us too. There’s a lot to look forward to.”

“I’m so happy to hear it. I want you to introduce me to everyone next time I visit, okay?”

“Sure. They’re an eccentric bunch, but they’re good people.”

I’d met Baldo at the Lanchester estate, back when I fought the sand golem. I’d hoped we might meet again someday and had been astonished to find him already helping out at Hausen when I returned after Galia. I learned then that Baldo had once been one of Aaron’s soldiers. As soon as he heard that Aaron had once more picked up the sword, he rushed to Hausen as soon as he could. He’d laughed when he saw me. “It’s a small world after all!”

It wasn’t just Baldo either. Many others who had once worked with or under Aaron were gathering in Hausen.

As for Set, we’d parted ways after our hometown burned down in a gargoyle attack. Since then, he’d been getting by as a traveling merchant, and the work had eventually brought him to the gates of Hausen. He was bringing building materials for our laborers when I saw him and his caravan, and he saw me. It had been a long time since our last meeting, and I had been relieved to see his daughter was healthy and enjoying the traveling life alongside her father.

When Set and I talked, he said he’d gotten a feel for the work and understood it well. However, he was looking for some place to settle, so I asked if he would be interested in managing a merchant guild in Hausen. Set was floored, and with great seriousness carved into his face, he asked that I give him a little time to think. As for me, the grim past I’d shared with Set had vanished with our village. I was asking him not as Set my old neighbor but as Set the merchant. A few days later, he told me that he had decided to set up shop in Hausen.

“Is it true that you’re inviting people from Seifort’s slums to the Barbatos estate?” Roxy asked, ever curious.

“It’s true. There’s no future for so many people trapped here. Eris told me that she intends to change the kingdom for the better, but that’s going to take time. Also, Hausen is probably the best place for people who want to start a new life.”

“If there’s anything I can do to help, don’t hesitate to ask, okay?” Roxy said with a hint of apology in her words. She seemed sorry that the Hart family had never welcomed the forsaken to its estate, but it wasn’t so simple for her. She had the residents of the Hart estate to think about, for one. For another, even if Roxy had been as brazen as I had in front of all the other holy knights, they would never have let her get away with it. For starters, Rudolph Lanchester would have gone after her just as he’d gone after me.

Really, if the Hart family had done anything more than it already had, the other holy knights might have ostracized them or worse. On the other hand, I was an outsider from beginning to end, which allowed me a certain freedom to do as I pleased. Or at least, that was how it had worked before. Now that Eris was in charge, I hoped to exercise even more freedoms.

“What’s with that wicked look on your face?” asked Roxy. “You’re plotting something, aren’t you? And let me guess—it has to do with Eris.”

“Huh? How did you know?”

“Fay, your face is an open book.” She then placed her hand on top of my own, and before I could move to control it, my Telepathy kicked into gear. *What wicked deeds are you planning, Fay?*

“Roxy, I think you should know I’m unintentionally reading your mind right now…”

I don’t mind. Fay, you’re always welcome to read what’s in my heart and on my mind. It also means I can do things like this.

“Things like what?”

Fate! Look out! It’s Miria! She’s right behind you with her flaming sword!

I rolled out of my seat in an instant, turning to face what I realized was thin air. Roxy had gotten me again! She’d used my Telepathy to lie right through her thoughts and trick me. To be fair, Roxy already knew about all my skills because I’d told her about them when I’d explained my Gluttony in that letter. She’d learned about Greed at that point as well.

“Oh, that was so fun! I wish I had Telepathy,” said Roxy.

“Why?”

“Well, I want to talk to Greed.”

“Greed? Not a good idea. He’s arrogant, foul-mouthed, and endlessly stubborn.”

“Oh, really, now? That makes me even more curious.” Roxy leaned over and peered at the black sword. She was clearly terribly intrigued, and I could tell through Telepathy that Greed loved the attention.

“Ah, this girl, she’s special! She’s got an eye for quality! You hear that, Fate? She wants to talk to me! I may be a sword, but I’m also a ladies’ man, you hear?”

“Probably because nobody can hear you.”

Roxy studied me and Greed chattering and nodded to herself. “I think I finally get it. Back when you were a servant, you were actually kind of infamous, Fay. All the other servants talked about the way you walked the halls with your hand on your sword, muttering to yourself. Now we know why.”

“I wasn’t talking to myself—I was talking to Greed. I swear!”

“That would be easier to believe if Greed had a voice, don’t you think?”

“That’s impossible—he’s a sword. Right, Greed?”

“No, it’s possible.”

“Eh?!” I nearly fell off the bench at this sudden revelation. I had gone this whole time fully believing that conversation with Greed was only possible through Telepathy.

“To be clear,” he added, “it’s only possible if you reach the next weapon level. If you do that, I can repair some of my lost abilities, Telepathy among them.”

“Wow, seriously?”

Why hadn’t he told me sooner?! The next level would be the fifth, and I wasn’t anywhere close to reaching it, which meant I still had a long way to go. Nonetheless, it was now something to look forward to. I hoped being able to talk to other people might fix a bit of Greed’s awful personality. The thought brought a grin to my face.

“What are you talking about now?” asked Roxy, peering intently at us both.

“Greed just said that he might be able to talk with other people after he reaches the next weapon level.”

“That’s fantastic. I can’t wait! Do you mind if I hold him? Greed? Just for a little?”

“Fine by me. Fine by you, too, right, Greed?”

I didn’t sense any resistance from Greed, so I passed the sword over. I was curious about what she would do with it. Roxy stood from the bench and drew the black sword from its sheath. Then, as she swung it left and right, a pained look grew upon her face.

Fear spiked within me. What the hell?! What’s going on? This has never happened before…

Roxy put a hand to her right eye, pushing at it as she squeezed out her next words. “Ugh…the Gluttony…it aches. It’s not enough, I need more!”

“Whoa! Stop! Please!” I cried.

Roxy straightened up immediately. “Well, how was my performance? Do I get an award for my rendition of Fate in Galia?”

She slid the sword back into its sheath and handed it back to me, her face shining with a sense of accomplishment. Greed cackled the entire time. I got the feeling she’d been wanting to do that particular performance for quite some time. Were my actions actually that funny? I supposed it warranted further thought. Myne had done something similar, and…even Eris had, actually.

Does this mean… I shook my head. No, I’m probably just overthinking it.

“It means people think doing an impression of you is funny. Congratulations!”

“What do you mean, congratulations?!” I roughly hooked Greed back on my belt. “Just quit it!”

Now it was my turn to do an impression of Roxy, and I wasn’t going to let her off easy.

“Oh, no!” she cried. “What are you going to do?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Okay, well, I’m going to close my eyes, so go for it!”

“You can’t do that!”

Our time together was so much fun that it passed in the blink of an eye—so quickly, in fact, that I’d completely forgotten the mission given to me by Roxy’s mother, Lady Aisha. Clearly, she’d run out of patience and come to look for us, because when I looked up, Lady Aisha was standing right behind Roxy. The people around her stared in awe, made quiet only by the finger Lady Aisha held to her mouth.

Soon, the party had plunged into total silence.

Chapter 29:
Aisha Hart

ROXY LOOKED AT ME, her head tilted to the side. She was confused, because of course she was. One moment we'd been bantering and laughing, and the next moment I was standing rigid as I stared at what waited behind her.

"What's wrong, Fay?"

Roxy started turning to look behind herself, but I coughed loudly to draw her focus back. Then I rapidly fumbled my way through some sort of excuse in a desperate attempt to keep her attention on me.

"Fate, that was the most awful attempt at a lie I think I've ever seen…" muttered Greed. "And I've been around a long, long time."

But there was no time for me to respond. Lady Aisha edged ever closer to Roxy, silently urging me to keep her occupied. I suddenly realized that Lady Aisha was so close that Roxy should have sensed her approaching. If she couldn't, did that mean Lady Aisha's ability to hide her own presence was on the level of a holy knight? Higher, perhaps?

Fate! We don't have time for these stray thoughts! my brain cried. I gathered myself and continued with the plan, just as Lady Aisha and I had decided. "Actually, Roxy, would you close your eyes for just a moment?"

"Why? You want to do another impression of me?"

"It's something different this time."

"Oh, is it a present?" Her face was full of excitement as she looked at me expectantly.

In a way, it kind of was a present, so I nodded vaguely.

"I can't tell if that nod means yes or…something different. Very well. There you go, my eyes are closed."

The moment Roxy's eyes closed, Lady Aisha and I quietly began to switch places.

"What are you doing, Fay? I hear you moving around. Can I open my eyes yet?"

"Not yet."

"What in the world are you up to?"

With Lady Aisha now standing in front of Roxy, we were ready to go. Lady Aisha gave us the sign that she was ready, and all the party guests realized our intentions. Aaron stood a short distance away from the group, watching everything with a grin.

"Okay, Roxy," I said. "You can open your eyes now."

"Finally. I wonder what you—ah!"

Roxy stilled, her mouth agape. In front of her stood Lady Aisha, throwing up a victory sign with a smile, clearly overjoyed at the success of her mission. When Roxy finally came to her senses, she ran to Lady Aisha and grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Mother?! But how? I received word from the estate saying you were feeling better, but it also said there was no need to come see you!”

“My dear, I’m on top of the world! I feel marvelous. The letter said you didn’t need to come see me because *I* intended to come see you myself!”

“You’ll have to give me a moment, Mother. I’m not entirely sure I understand what’s going on…” Roxy struggled to come to grips with the situation. When she’d last seen her mother, Lady Aisha had been so weak that she couldn’t walk without a servant’s help. Yet here she was, dancing around with a bounce in her step. Anyone would have been baffled. Even I was a little taken aback by Lady Aisha’s transformation, and I’d healed her myself. Roxy knew her mother’s illness much more thoroughly than I did, which made it all the more confusing for her.

“Fate healed me,” Lady Aisha said casually. “Though to be clear, I don’t really know exactly how.”

“Fate did this?! But I don’t understand—how?” Roxy closed in on me, giving me no room to move. She grabbed hold of my hand, her eyes seeming to say that she wouldn’t let go until I explained things.

“Well, to be honest, it wasn’t all me.” I unsheathed Greed with a wry grin and transformed the black sword into the black stave.

“It changes form,” murmured Roxy. “There’s this stave, then the bow, the scythe, and the shield, right?”

“Right. I unlocked the black stave by giving up the entirety of the stats I earned in the battle with the Divine Dragon.”

“Ah, back when…” said Roxy, a hint of joy in her face.

Even now, I remembered it as clearly as if it had happened only the day before. The Divine Dragon’s overwhelming attack. The skull mask I wore crumbling from my face, revealing my true identity. Roxy looking at me, tears streaming down her cheeks as some feeling gripped my heart. *What have I done?* I thought. I never imagined then that I would ever see her warm, kind smile again…but now I was filled with gratitude.

“I hate to interrupt such a beautiful moment,” said Lady Aisha, sweeping in between Roxy and myself, “but have you forgotten I’m still here? Can you save these wistful reminiscences for a little later?”

“Mother, that’s not at all what we were doing, right, Fay?”

“Yes, so let’s keep the jokes to a minimum.” I nodded. I cleared my throat and showed both Roxy and Lady Aisha the black stave. “Let’s take Greed’s Fourth Level as an example. If I feed the stave even more of my stats, I can use a secret technique. These secret techniques differ depending on what form Greed takes.”

To put it all into perspective, I shared each level and its corresponding secret technique.

Level 1 (the black bow): Bloody Ptarmigan
A shot as fast as lightning with a wide area of attack.
Level 2 (the black scythe): Deadly Inferno

Kills anything (even immortal beings) by burning through the core of the opponent's magical energy flow.

Level 3 (the black shield): Reflective Fortress

Absorbs the enemy's attack and delivers it back multiplied.

Level 4 (the black stave): Twilight Healing

Cures all injuries and illnesses.

Roxy nodded vigorously as she listened. "I see, you used Twilight Healing to heal my mother of her illness. Thank you, Fay! But, um, I'm a little worried that she may be…almost *too* healthy now."

"I actually thought exactly the same thing. I never expected her to be quite so lively."

"Look at me, stuck here listening to the two of you go on and on about skills and techniques," said Lady Aisha, laughing. "Can't you both just be happy that I've recovered?"

Roxy narrowed her eyes as she studied her mother. "In that case, can you *please* stop playing tricks on your own daughter?"

"But it was a surprise. That's how surprises work! Don't you think so, Fate?"

"Er, uh, I mean, I think…yes?"

"What's with that tone of voice, young man? You're making it sound like I forced you into this against your own will."

Honestly, right from the start, I'd had a strong feeling that I had no choice but to go along with Lady Aisha. Then again, I was already in this deep, so perhaps that was for the best.

"Look at it this way, Roxy. Lady Aisha came all this way from the Hart family estate because she wanted you to see for yourself that she'd recovered. If she wrote it in a letter, you wouldn't really know just how true that was."

"Well, if you say so, Fay." Roxy's eyes were slowly tearing up. "I really am glad, I must say. I've been worried about you for so long, Mother…"

Lady Aisha promptly burst into tears herself, and the two stood there for a time holding each other and crying until they calmed down. Then they turned to me and once again expressed their thanks. It made me genuinely…happy. I hadn't healed Aisha for thanks or reward, but their gratitude brought a real smile to my face. Seeing Lady Aisha healthy and doting on Roxy really made me feel like this was the way things were supposed to be.

I transformed the black stave back into the black sword and returned it to its sheath.

"I was wondering," said Roxy, "just how many stats do you have to give Greed in order to cast that secret technique? Healing is no small feat. I'm sure it must have been quite a lot."

"Yeah, it's quite the sum. For Twilight Healing, it's 40 percent of my stats."

"A whole 40 percent… And how many stats was that, roughly?"

I was a little hesitant to say because it was actually pretty up there, but I'd promised myself to be honest with Roxy, so I confessed. On hearing the number, Roxy and Lady Aisha were stunned into momentary silence.

"You're joking, right?" Lady Aisha asked. "Fate, are you serious?"

"Really? That much?" Roxy echoed.

"But that's…that's well over four hundred million…I can't believe it!"

"Mother, calm down! Remember that Fate *did* slay the Divine Dragon, so he had a lot to begin with. Still, to think you'd so freely give them up…"

Lady Aisha was still lost in disbelief. Meanwhile, Roxy seemed oddly accepting of the situation. Then she snapped her fingers, her expression showing that she'd finally worked something out. "Aha! Now I understand," she declared.

"Understand what?" I asked.

"Why my mother is so thoroughly revitalized. I think it's because you gave *so many* stats—more than the Divine Dragon holds itself!—to heal her."

"You…might be right."

Her hypothesis certainly held water. All of Greed's secret techniques were incredibly powerful. I was certain that Twilight Healing probably did more than just heal a person's wounds. After all, to cast it, I had to be in the Domain of E, which actually made it a little foolish to think it just cured run-of-the-mill issues. It was entirely possible that Lady Aisha's stats had shot through the roof. That said, I wasn't about to go looking without permission—I'd decided that back when I was still a servant.

After Lady Aisha had her fill of playfully bullying Roxy and me, she turned to the other guests and joined the rest of the party.

"She's going to be a handful," said Roxy, her eyes looking to the future.

Not a hint remained of the frail and bedridden Lady Aisha I'd met all that time ago. She had been on death's door when I healed her. But even if I had defied the will of the gods by giving Lady Aisha's life back to her, I had no regrets. Seeing her so happy at Roxy's party was proof enough that I had made the right decision.

Chapter 30:
The Trials of Greed

AFTER A FEW MORE HOURS, the boisterous voices of the party began to quiet, and people bid their farewells to Roxy and her mother before heading home. I couldn't help but laugh at the sight of Mugan dragging Miria away by her collar as she made her displeasure vocal. It seemed that this was just part and parcel of everyday life for Roxy, and she waved with a smile as she called, "See you both tomorrow!"

Miria's gaze locked onto my own, and I just *knew* that sooner or later, I'd be wrapped up in one of her schemes again. Even so, I couldn't bring myself to hate her, no matter how much she seemed to dislike me. I chuckled, at which point I noticed Aaron approaching.

"Fate, I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to head off early. I need to check in at the castle."

"Is it about Memil?"

"Yes. She'll be coming to the manor tomorrow. There are still some arrangements that need to be settled, but I expect to be back in the morning with Memil. So at least that's one thing to look forward to."

"I'll do my best to be mentally prepared."

"Indeed. Very well, I'll see you then," he said. Then, turning to Roxy and Lady Aisha, "I had a truly wonderful time today, Roxy, Aisha. I do hope you'll invite me to whatever you plan next."

Lady Aisha and Roxy bowed politely and promised that they would. Then Aaron put on his coat and headed out. That left me as the last remaining guest. Just as I was thinking about heading back to Barbatos Manor, Lady Aisha's face lit up with inspiration.

"If Aaron is going to the castle, that means you're all alone tonight, Fate. I've heard you don't have any servants at the manor yet. In that case, why don't you stay here this evening?"

"Huh? Er, would that be okay?"

I was a little bewildered by Lady Aisha's sudden invitation, and I looked to Roxy. She was the head of the family, after all, and now that I was a member of one of the five esteemed families as well, I worried over whether it was appropriate for me to spend the night at another manor.

However, Roxy instantly shoved my worries aside. "It's fine by me," she said as if it were nothing. "And knowing Fate, he probably hasn't even thought about how he's going to feed himself."

"I, uh…"

The truth of it was that, well, Aaron and I lived a little bit ferally. Aaron spent every day in meetings with the kingdom's white knights, and he didn't return home until late. For my part, I hadn't been sleeping much because I'd been investigating Rafale. Roxy was right; I just didn't really give much thought to maintaining a healthy diet. That was probably part of

why everything I'd eaten at Roxy's party had struck me as especially delicious.

"How about I make you dinner?" said Roxy.

"You'll make it yourself?!"

I couldn't help but be startled. It was one thing for Roxy to have prepared the ingredients for the barbecue and another to hear she'd focused so much on culinary endeavors that she could cook up a whole meal. I couldn't actually remember her ever having cooked while I was her servant. And here she was saying she'd make me dinner.

"No need to be *that* surprised! I've been really working at it, you know? Once you taste my dishes, *then* you can be shocked."

Maybe it was just my imagination, but at that moment, I felt like I could see a distinct aura of flame surrounding Roxy. I was actually truly happy that I'd have a chance to taste something she cooked. The barbecue had given me good reason to look forward to this.

"I can't wait," I assured her. "Really."

Roxy nodded happily. "I'll do my best!"

I wonder what dish she'll make...

Just as my imagination was beginning to take off, Lady Aisha jumped in. "Don't forget! Lady Aisha has entered the battle!"

"Mother?! But why?"

"Because it's fun, that's why! It is time for mother and daughter to put their nobility to the test!"

"But Mother, what does cooking have to do with proving our nobility?"

Oh, dear. Lady Aisha had turned the prospect of an ordinary meal into a cook-off battle. I had a bad feeling that the judge was going to be me. I worried that having to choose one dish over another would lead to hurt feelings. Right then and there, I made up my mind that whatever they prepared, I would deem them equally tasty.

"By the way, Fate," said Lady Aisha, her eyes piercing my mind, "I'll say this up front so it's clear: There will be no funny business. No saying that both dishes are of equal deliciousness. You make your decision and you make it clearly."

"Y-yes, ma'am."

"Mother, please!" cried Roxy.

Lady Aisha's competitive side was something of a revelation—a real change from the gentle woman I was used to. If it had ever been unclear that she was Roxy's mother, there could no longer be any doubt.

All of a sudden, however, the once-cheerful Lady Aisha dropped into silence. Without uttering another word, she began walking, so Roxy and I followed her off the terrace. The sun was setting, and the cold winds of winter were settling back in. However, Lady Aisha wasn't heading for the manor, as we expected, but in the direction of the sunset.

Suddenly, I knew where she was going. How could I have missed it earlier? Lady Aisha had declared her intention to see Roxy, but that wasn't her only reason for coming to the manor. There was another thing she wanted to do here, something she couldn't have done while bedridden far away from the capital. It was with these thoughts in mind that we arrived at the gravestone of Lord Mason Hart.

"Thank you, Fate," said Lady Aisha quietly. "Being able to stand here is like a dream. Ever since I can remember, he always said that when he died, this was where he wanted to be put to rest."

"Lady Aisha…"

It reminded me of when I'd first come here with Roxy. I'd been so overjoyed at becoming a servant that I hadn't thought at all about Lord Mason's passing until I was forced to look at his grave.

Roxy placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "There's no need for you to feel bad, Fay," she said. "You've granted my mother one of her wishes."

I placed my hand atop Roxy's and nodded. We stayed like that until Lady Aisha turned back to us and urged us all to scurry back inside. The sky had filled with thick gray clouds, and a soft snow had begun to fall.

"I think I'll cook something nice and warm," said Lady Aisha. "How about you, my daughter?"

"I'll cook something that warms to the very bones. I'm not about to lose to you, Mother."

"I might not be your match with the blade, but in my eyes, you're little more than a newborn when it comes to cooking!"

Lady Aisha had officially issued her challenge, but Roxy wasn't about to back down. All the same, it made me think. Lady Aisha's ability to switch modes so quickly from normal to ready-for-action was really something I could learn from. It wasn't something that came from stats or skills either, but rather a strength all her own.

Dinner that night, unsurprisingly, was prepared by both Roxy and Lady Aisha. What *was* surprising, however, was that they both chose to prepare the exact same dish. When they each decided to cook something warm and hearty, they both landed upon the idea of a creamy and butter-rich stew. I couldn't help but laugh at the coincidence.

To be honest, both stews were so good that I truly couldn't decide which was better. Lady Aisha had insisted I make a decision, but in the end, I just couldn't. Fortunately, even though Roxy and her mother had been so pushy about the competition, they were more pleased to see me devouring both stews.

After our rowdy competition dinner, I relaxed in the manor baths, then retired to my room. I unclasped Greed from my belt and placed the black sword against the side of the bed. Now that I thought about it, I realized he'd been silent ever since the party ended. He was usually pretty

talkative in the moments before I slept, but I guessed even Greed had his off days.

Thoughts of the day ran through my mind as I closed my eyes. I thought of Lady Aisha running me around like a servant and of the way Roxy and I had been stuck at her beck and call the whole evening…and I fell into slumber.

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I found myself standing in a space of pure white. It was a space I knew very well, because I'd seen it a lot in recent days. At my feet, under the white flooring upon which I stood, lay a hellscape composed of all the crying, screaming souls my Gluttony had devoured. In this sense, the floor was a barrier that kept the lesser effects of my Gluttony at bay.

Then I heard her calling out to me—the girl of white who had created the barrier—and I turned to find her standing before me. "Hello, Luna."

"Good evening, Fate. You look well. You were really pushing it when you devoured the archdemon, however."

"I wanted to thank you for your help back then. Without your support, I'd never be in the Domain of E."

"I appreciate the honesty. Seems to me you're starting to mature and understand the world. At least from what I've seen—and I see everything from here."

"Everything?! Don't I get a little privacy?"

Just how much did Luna see? *Everything* would have to mean the battle with Rafale, the reunion with Roxy, even the party. But I wasn't expecting what she said next at all.

"Let me give you a little advice, though: Spend a little longer in the bath. Soaking heals the body, but it doesn't work if you're only in there for a minute. I also think it would be wise to use a hair treatment after you wash your hair."

"What are you watching that for?! You don't need to see me in the bath!"

"I'm sorry, Fate, but it does get awfully boring in here." I gripped the sides of my head in anguish. She'd seen too much. The bath should be off-limits.

"There, there, Fate," said Luna, "No need to get so worked up."

"That's rich coming from you! You're the one watching it all!"

"Well, it's not going to stop, you know. I'm going to keep doing it."

"Stop it already!" I wailed. Can't I take a single bath in peace?!

I pleaded and begged for her to at least leave my hygiene to me and me alone. Somehow, I managed to convince her.

Then I heard a hearty laugh echoing from behind me. I turned to find a tall redheaded man standing off in the distance, an arrogant look written across his face. I couldn't hide my astonishment when I saw him.

"Greed?! What are you doing here?"

“I couldn’t help overhearing you and Luna having so much fun together, so I came to check it out,” he said with a grin. “Or, well—to be honest, I asked Luna to make a path for me to get here, and it took some time, but I’m finally back.”

By the sound of it, this was no mean feat. “If it took you so much work to get here, you must have a reason for it,” I said.

“Well.” Greed smirked. “It’s about time I started training you myself, man to man. Consider this the beginning of the trials of Greed.”

Chapter 31:
To the Top

GREED POINTED the black sword in his hand straight at me. It was an odd sight, the human version of Greed holding the weapon version of Greed. I admit that I gawped.

"Don't be so stunned," said Greed, exasperated. "This world is a mental construct maintained by Luna. The rules of normality don't apply. My human form is the clearest example of that. Now hurry up and ready your sword!"

"My sword? But where is it?"

Greed shook his head at the confusion plastered across my face. "Just use your mind."

My mind? I pictured the black sword and was startled to find it suddenly in my hand. Now this realm had two black swords. As Greed and I stood facing each other, our weapons at the ready, that just made everything feel all the more surreal and otherworldly.

"I'm just going to hang out here to watch from the side," said Luna. "It's pretty nice to have front row seats to the battle between Gluttony and Greed."

"Better make some room, unless you want to be part of it!"

"Fine, fine," said Luna. "I've got my eye on you, Greed. I know you're going to try to rope me into this."

Greed grunted and gestured Luna away as if she were a nuisance. Luna giggled at his sheer imperiousness, but she took a vantage point far away from where we stood.

"This far is fine, isn't it?" called Luna. "No complaints, I assume? No? Excellent. Now please go ahead whenever you're ready."

"How about you go even farther so I can't hear your blabbering?" muttered Greed.

Greed and Luna were like oil and water. Greed was always pushing me around and making fun of me, but in this place, he was theoretically at Luna's mercy. It was such a rare sight that I couldn't help but laugh.

"What's so funny?"

Greed's glare pierced my very soul. It terrified me a bit, but at the same time…I found it refreshing. As a sword, Greed could only emote through his voice. I was interested to see what he really looked like when he got angry.

"What are you staring at?!" Greed demanded.

"Well, let's be honest," I said, "it's still new seeing you all human-like, complete with facial expressions."

"I'm about to put you through the hardest training you've ever known, and that's what you care about? Let me tell you, Fate, I won't be nearly as gentle with you as Aaron was."

“What do you mean?!”

“You’ll see. Get ready.” Greed readied his black sword, and for a brief instant, his gaze once again pierced through me. In the next instant, he was gone.

Wait—where’d he go? I can’t follow him with my eyes. Before another thought even crossed my mind, my left arm was cut clean off my body. I screamed.

“What’s all the crying about?” asked Greed. “Your left arm is good as new. See?”

I looked to my left to find that my left arm was, indeed, back to normal. The pain I’d felt had also nigh-instantaneously vanished.

Greed went on: “It’s like I said, this world is a construct of your mind. You don’t physically exist here, so cuts won’t hurt as long as your mind stays strong.”

“You could have told me that before you chopped off my arm! This is great.”

“Don’t get too comfortable. Those cuts and injuries can build up until they’re too much for the mind to take.” Greed pointed to the barrier at his feet. “If your mind can’t handle the strain, you end up down there, consumed by your Gluttony.”

“Seriously?”

“I go to all the trouble of getting here, and now you think I’d lie to you?”

I could tell by his tone that Greed wasn’t joking. In the distance, Luna was nodding. This was no laughing matter. Greed didn’t intend to let me off lightly. Even if I could withstand Greed’s attacks, and even if I wouldn’t actually die in this world, I might still lose my mind to Gluttony.

So why did Greed have to choose now, of all times? Why did he have to do this while I slept in Roxy’s manor?

“You think I didn’t think about it?” asked Greed, reading my mind. “I chose now because you can’t afford to lose again. If you lose here, Gluttony consumes you—and you know what happens next.”

“Greed, you…”

“If you don’t like it, then give up. Well, what’ll it be, Fate?” Greed’s eyes were as sinister as his tone. He was the very incarnation of a villain.

Luna let him know it from the sidelines. “Boo! Boo! You’re the worst, Greed!”

“If you’re just watching, then shut up!” Greed spun his sword threateningly. He looked about to go after Luna, so I dropped into a battle-ready stance.

“*I’m* your opponent, Greed.”

“That’s it, that’s the idea—that’s exactly how you need to be. But be warned: I’m giving you all I’ve got.”

“Fine.”

This time I launched the first strike. From a high guard, I brought my blade down on Greed. However, Greed wove around my strike with one eye closed. I wasn't done yet. My strike had herded Greed where I wanted him, and I launched my second attack from a middle guard—not a feint this time.

But even this missed its intended target. Greed defended himself with his own sword, and he did it single-handedly to boot.

"Your blade work is still too forgiving," he said. "Don't get too big for your boots just because you've reached the Domain of E."

"What?!"

"How many times do I have to tell you? The Domain of E is beyond humanity, and you've only just dipped your toes into it. You still have a long road ahead, wouldn't you say?"

"Greed…"

Sparks shot from our blades as they pushed against each other.

"You made your choice." Greed pushed the blades toward my face, flexing his true strength. "The bearer before you…chose a different path. I don't know what direction you'll choose, Fate, but I can say one thing for sure."

I was being overpowered. I pushed back with all my might, but Greed shoved me back to where I'd stood when our fight first began. A slight grin crossed his face as he shouted. "You must become stronger, Fate!"

"You just watch me," I said through gritted teeth.

"That's it. Now we're talking."

Even now, the memory of being unable to stop Myne from leaving still haunted me. I had been utterly powerless before Shin—the source of the nightwalkers. It had been excruciating to feel so feeble before him, to be left with my arms and legs petrified by his power while he left with Myne in tow.

I still owed Myne a great debt. On the way to Galia, she had helped fill my heart with the confidence it lacked. Back then, I'd had nearly no control over my Gluttony, and I'd struggled with it, but having someone by my side who understood those struggles had helped me cope. She didn't talk much, but I had fond memories of her company in itself. Her kindness was in her companionship.

And it was from Myne that I had asked the greatest favor…to kill me, if I lost myself to the urges of my Gluttony. I had asked entirely too much of her, and I had spent much of our time afterward apologizing for it. In response, Myne had said only: "I'm glad you're better." She didn't blame me for anything or expect anything from me. All I got were four simple words and the tiniest hint of happiness on her otherwise stoic face—and it was enough.

Now, I couldn't forget the words she'd spoken before she left to follow Shin…words that felt so out of character for the Myne I knew: *I'm sorry.*

She'd never apologized to me before, and it hurt that they had also been her parting words. It pained me even further that she'd spoken them because I'd been powerless to help her.

Greed understood. That was why he'd pulled all this together—come all this way and asked Luna to create this place, all in order to inspire and encourage me. If he was willing to go this far for me, then I had to ensure that I wouldn't let him down.

I pushed my sword back into Greed's and shouted. "I *will* get stronger!"

Greed chuckled. "Words are nothing. Show me."

"Bring it on, Greed!"

This world was a mental construct. If I relied on my eyes, I wouldn't be able to follow Greed's movements. I needed to unleash the power of all my senses and focus. Greed moved faster than the eye could see, but I couldn't let myself get hung up on that. I had to draw upon my experience. Use memories to my advantage.

Greed's sword swung in from a blind angle, but I blocked it with my sword.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Your new body slowing you down?"

"Big words, little man. How about this?" Greed leaped backward, and as he did, he transformed his black sword into a black bow.

"You can do that too?!"

"Of course I can. Whatever you can do, so can I. But I'm just getting started."

"You can't be serious…"

"Said I was, didn't I? *Deadly* serious. Better put your guard up, Fate."

The black bow in Greed's hand began to transform and grow. I knew its ominous aura all too well—it could mean only one thing. The Bloody Ptarmigan was coming my way. Greed was going to vaporize me. A grin spread over his face as I scrambled. He was more than ready to fire.

"You're inhuman, you fiend!" I cried.

"Well, you got one thing right. I'm not a human—I'm a weapon."

"That's not what I mean!"

"Get ready, Fate!"

"It's too big! I can't fight that! It's impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible!"

As merciless as he'd warned, Greed proved he wasn't joking. He released the bowstring and fired straight at me.

I barely managed to transform my own sword into the black shield to defend against the attack. The force was enormous, and it sent me tumbling away. Any slower and the attack would have left me disintegrated. Having always been on the firing side, I experienced the firepower in a brand-new and awful way.

That son of a—who whips out a weapon of mass destruction during a sparring match?!

He wasn't the only one with a trick up his sleeve. I poured power into my own weapon, transforming it into the black bow, and as I did, I realized something interesting… I didn't feel it pulling at my stats.

Of course! This world isn't real! And if the world wasn't real, then I could fire Bloody Ptarmigan as much as I liked. "It's my turn, Greed!"

"Fate, it might not be wise to be so reckless—"

"That's rich coming from you!"

I fired multiple bursts of the Bloody Ptarmigan. I could never do something like that in the real world because every shot ate up my stats, but here, it felt incredible. The attacks rained down on Greed, who ran and dodged, hiding behind his own black shield. He was quite the acrobat. *Eyes on the target…read his movement…now!*

Then I heard a scream.

Uh-oh…

My last shot had knocked Luna over. Fortunately, it hadn't been the direct attack itself but rather the force of the blast. However, when she got back to her feet, her red eyes were alight with rage. "I thought I told you to leave me out of this! Or do you really want to fight me that badly?" Her mouth split with a grin. "If it's me you want, then it's me you'll get!"

"Huh?!"

Greed and I balked with simultaneous surprise, uncertainty on our faces.

Luna snapped her fingers. From the white ground upon which we stood, a monster began to form—a beast connected by metal piping, with four wings sprouting from its back and six legs that sent shock waves through the ground. Above the monster's head floated a halo, like that of an angel.

My jaw dropped, as did Greed's as we both exclaimed in disbelief: "Haniel?!"

We stood there paralyzed, shaking in fear at the unimaginable arrival of the chimera.

Luna had to be sincerely ticked if she was summoning this beast to her side. She looked down upon us where she stood on its head. "I am the creator of this world—meaning that in this place, I am your god. Here, my Haniel is invincible. But there's no need to worry—all you have to do is survive until morning. So let's begin!"

Greed glanced at me as the imposing figure of Haniel stomped ever closer. "Fate, have at it." He inclined his head at the chimera. "It'll be excellent practice. I'll watch over you from there."

"But I'll never make it until morning without your help!"

"All right, all right, but quit poking me with the tip of your sword. It hurts!"

So we readied our blades, nodded at each other, and launched ourselves at the great chimera. In my heart, as we fought, I sent my thanks to both Greed and Luna. I wouldn't let them down. I *would* grow stronger.

Chapter 32:
The Manor's New Servant

I BECAME AWARE of a voice calling out to me, one I knew well. A dignified, honorable voice, but it cut into my desire to sleep for just a little longer…

"Fay, Fay… Fate Barbatos! Wake up!"

"Huh?!"

I opened my eyes to find Roxy standing in front of my bed, her expression somewhat troubled. Right—I'd spent the night at Hart Manor. As soon as I'd fallen asleep, I'd been whisked away to Luna's world, where I endured Greed's trials. Sleep was supposed to be a time of rest, but instead, I woke up only more exhausted. Because of that, I'd slept in, and Roxy had come to wake me when it seemed like I might not wake up at all.

"How many times must I call your name before you wake up? You must have been really exhausted, Fay," Roxy said in disbelief.

"Greed invaded my dreams for a special training session. He really put me through the wringer."

"I'm a little envious you get along so well… But I thought you might want to get up a little earlier today because it's a big day."

"A big day?" My head was still cloudy with sleep. I knew the day was important, but I couldn't seem to remember why.

Roxy playfully flicked me in the forehead and smiled. "Aaron will be returning to Barbatos Manor quite soon, I think."

"Aaron…returning…manor…ah!"

"Looks like you remembered. But just to be sure, why is today important, Fay?"

"Because Memil Vlerick is coming to Barbatos Manor…as a newly adopted member of the Barbatos family."

"That's right. And you certainly can't greet her looking all sleepy like that. Make sure you look the part, Fay. You're the head of the family!"

One glance at Roxy made clear exactly what she meant. She was the very ideal of a family head, right down to her aura: neat, tidy, and reliable. I had to aim for at least a fraction of that.

"Good to see signs of life in you, Fay. First things first—let's get you some breakfast. You should never go to battle on an empty stomach."

"Did you say 'battle'?!"

"You certainly make it seem like it's going to be an ordeal. Or am I mistaken?"

"Unfortunately, you're pretty much on the mark."

Huh. Had Greed decided to pull me into his training session in part because he knew that I was a bundle of nerves when it came to Memil? It was a very Greed-esque way to approach things, when I thought about it. He knew I wouldn't get far worrying and ruminating on my own, so he

devised an explosive distraction. I glanced at the black sword leaning against the bed. I got the strong sense it wanted to say something, but I decided the first order of business was exactly as Roxy had said. Breakfast.

My stomach belched loudly as I stood. Fortunately, it wasn't my Gluttony, just my yawning appetite. Having eaten so well the previous day, my stomach expected the same treatment again. "When you say breakfast… did you make it, Roxy?"

"I did! But it's not like I came here to wake you up because I went to the trouble of making breakfast and then it seemed like you would *never* wake up, so I got kind of fidgety about it…"

"Ah, so that's what happened. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, I'm just teasing. I'll be waiting in the dining room, so come when you're ready."

Roxy left the guest room, leaving me with the black sword. I quickly got dressed and tidied my hair, then took Greed in his scabbard and attached him to my belt.

"Wipe that drool off your face, you slob," said Greed. "It's disgusting that you're so giddy just because Roxy came in here to wake you up."

"What, I'm not allowed to be happy now? Give me a break."

"Get too high up in the clouds and you'll lose track of your feet. Looks like I'm going to have to put you through training every night for a while yet. Can't have you being all flustered all day. Really can't. A boy like you needs balance, and I'll beat it into you every night. And another thing—"

"All right, enough already. You can ease off now, yeah? I'm going to get some breakfast."

"Oi! I'm not done yet!"

Greed worried about the strangest things sometimes. But we could talk more about his nagging after breakfast—and after I met with Memil.

I headed out the door to the dining room. Having worked in Hart Manor, I could navigate it with my eyes closed. I still didn't want to test that theory, to be clear. I'd probably end up colliding with one of the manor's servants.

The dining room was located at the end of a long hallway, next to the kitchen. As I continued on my way there, the head servant, Haru, spotted me.

"Ah, so you're finally awake," she said, walking up to me. "That must mean Roxy was successful. When I went to wake you, you didn't so much as twitch."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that. You look like you have something to tell me."

"Ah, yes. I've just returned from running a few errands at the castle, where I met Aaron. When I told him you had stayed here over the evening, he asked me to convey a message."

"And what's that?"

“He’ll be back a little later than expected, but he expects to return before lunch.”

“Thank you for letting me know, Haru.”

She nodded. “Lady Roxy is waiting for you in the dining room.” She then led me the rest of the way. I told her I knew how to get there, so she didn’t need to waste her time showing me there, but she insisted. “While you are our guest, you will be treated as such.”

When I entered the dining room and looked around, I could only call it a nostalgic sight. At Hart Manor, it was customary for the family head to eat with the servants once a week. I still remembered the day that meat finally showed up on the menu. Everyone laughed at me as I excitedly shoveled what was then a rarity for me into my mouth. This time, at the head of the table where we’d all once sat, I found a plate of sandwiches waiting for me. Roxy was already seated, and she smiled when she saw me.

“Fate, please, take a seat.”

I took a seat next to Roxy and heard the doors to the dining room close, leaving us alone together.

“Excuse me? I’m here too.”

Ah, yes, of course. My partner and abiding annoyance, Greed. I unclasped the black sword from my belt and leaned it against the chair next to me. With that done, I could eat in peace. “You made ham sandwiches and egg sandwiches,” I said to Roxy. “They look delicious!”

“I really put my heart into them, but to be honest, I did get some help from Mother.”

“They look great, really. Can I try them?”

“Please, go right ahead.”

“I’ll start with a ham sandwich then.”

Roxy’s eyes were filled with expectation. I felt a little nervous. However, once I took a bite, those nervous feelings melted away. The bread was firm but supple without being too dry. Between the slices of bread, a wonderfully fragrant ham was accompanied by crunchy lettuce leaves and accented with mayonnaise. I could have eaten them all day.

“This is amazing!”

“I’m so glad to hear it. There’s plenty more, so be sure to eat your fill. I know you and your appetite very well,” said Roxy as she took the sandwiches from her own plate and placed them on my own.

“I can’t eat that much! You don’t have to give me your share.”

“I tasted the sandwiches as I made them—to make sure I got the balance right, you know? I’m actually quite full.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes! I probably ate too much, when I think about it,” Roxy said nonchalantly. I could tell by her expression that she didn’t want me to worry—she just wanted me to eat.

“Well, if you insist,” I said, “then next, I’ll try an egg sandwich!”

There really was something warm and comforting in having breakfast with Roxy. It reminded me of working at Hart Manor. I realized suddenly that even though Roxy and I had been of vastly different social standing back then, she had treated me in exactly the same way as she did now. A wave of gratitude washed over me.

Once I finished breakfast, my stomach was so full that I had to loosen my belt. Roxy hadn't been joking about the amount of food she'd made, and I'd eaten enough that I could probably even skip lunch. We passed the time afterward by chatting and laughing over cups of tea, and I told Roxy what Aaron had passed on through Haru.

"I see, so he'll be a little late," Roxy said.

"At least now that I have a little time, I can do a touch of cleaning while I wait for him to return."

"I wish I could help, but unfortunately I have business at the castle…"

"Don't worry about it. You invited me to an incredible party, and you even gave me a bed. It all came with a delicious breakfast too! It's time for you to go off and attend to your holy knight duties."

"Fay, don't forget. You're a holy knight too, you know."

"Oh, yeah. I am, aren't I?" I said, laughing as I drank the last of my tea. It really was hard to feel like I hadn't been transported back to a time before that was the case.

***

After breakfast, Roxy and I left the manor together. She headed for the castle, while I headed to Barbatos Manor to get started cleaning. As might be expected of a manor belonging to one of the five esteemed families, Barbatos Manor had a surplus of rooms. Over the years, it had all fallen into a state of disrepair. Rain had rotted the floorboards and warped the doors, so there was no shortage of things to fix.

Roxy walked with me to Barbatos Manor, where we parted ways.

"Thank you, Roxy," I said. "See you tomorrow."

"I'll visit soon to see Memil."

"I'll let her know when I see her."

"Thank you. Until then."

I waved as Roxy left, walking toward the castle. No matter how many times I saw it, there was still something so impressive about Roxy's silhouette.

But I couldn't look at her forever—I had to get started cleaning and repairing the manor. I decided to start with the front door. It had been in bad shape when we first arrived, and Myne had been so careless when she opened and closed it that it was practically falling off its hinges. It probably would have been better to replace it entirely.

"I guess for now, I'll just make sure it's usable."

We'd been to the Merchant's District earlier, where we'd bought most of what we needed. Just inside the door of the manor was a hammer, some nails, and lumber. I took the hammer and nails and got to work on the front

door. It took me back to my time in the slums. Back then, if anything broke, you had no choice but to fix it yourself. I nurtured that mindset even now, and though my instinct was to slowly but surely get around to fixing everything within the manor, I had to acknowledge that the sheer scale of the project was beyond me.

"The sooner we can get the help of a professional carpenter around here, the better," I muttered.

"Took you long enough to realize," said Greed. "I guess it's hard for you to leave your old life behind. Remember how big we lived back in Galia? You need to get into that frame of mind again. This sheath I live in now cost you five hundred gold coins!"

"The economy is all sorts of inflated over there—you know that. We're back to normal here!"

Greed didn't worry about gold or money so long as his aesthetic desires were met. But the truth was that we needed money to repair and rebuild Hausen. If we weren't a little frugal here, we wouldn't have the funds to do what we really needed.

"That should do it," I said, looking at the now-repaired front door. I'd replaced the hinges, and I tried opening and closing it. It felt good. A little oil and I was sure it would last a good while. *All right! What needs doing next?*

All my worries seemed to dissipate into the air, and enthusiasm welled in their place. I went on to repair the roof in strategic locations, and I also pulled up some of the old floorboards to replace. By the time I realized it, the sun was nearing its peak.

"Almost lunchtime," I noted.

"Fate, he's back," said Greed.

"Ah, you're right."

Two strong sources of magical energy were making their way toward the manor. One was Aaron's, which I knew well. The other had to belong to Memil. Thanks to Rafale's experimentation, Memil's stats were now up there with the cream of the holy knight crop. I put my repair work on hold and quietly waited for the two of them to arrive.

"You're awfully nervous," Greed observed.

"Could you stop talking like you're just sitting back and commentating on a show?"

Greed laughed. "Well, if we're being honest, I really am just a captive audience to all of this, aren't I?"

"You weasel…" I gave the sword a little nudge as the front door opened.

Aaron walked in first. "Sorry we're late. I left a message with Haru. Did you get it?"

"Yes. Did preparations at the castle take longer than expected?"

"No, no, nothing like that. It just took some time to pick out Memil's outfit."

“Outfit?! What do you mean?”

“Perhaps it’s faster for you to see for yourself. Come on inside, Memil!”

“Okay,” a young woman’s voice responded, and Memil stepped inside.

I gaped. She had transformed. The overwhelming presence of Memil the holy knight had all but vanished. Instead, she wore a frilly maid’s uniform that perfectly matched her purple hair—she would have been utterly at home with any of Hart Manor’s maids.

This outfit…is this Aaron’s preference or…did Memil pick it herself?!

She couldn’t possibly have worn anything like it before now. At least, I’d never seen her in anything like it. And here I’d been mentally preparing myself for her arrival—that seemed suddenly silly in the face of Memil’s newly meek, mild, and frankly cute appearance.

“It’s nice to meet you, Brother,” she said, bowing politely before me.

But as she raised her head, the slightest hint of a devilish smile graced her lips. A shiver of worry darted down my spine.

Afterword

HELLO, this is Isshiki Ichika. It's been seven months since Volume Three, but Volume Four is finally here.

This volume focused on events after the defeat of the Divine Dragon. Fate, as usual, fought his way through some crazy stuff! But also, as I wrote this volume, I couldn't help but wonder if readers would feel like Roxy didn't have a big-enough part. I wanted to give her space in the second half of the book to really shine, and I'm happy as long as readers feel like the only one for Fate is Roxy.

This volume also saw the return of Aaron Barbatos, who first appeared in Volume Two. Back then, Aaron said he had something he wanted to tell Fate, and now we finally know what. Having seen Fate's efforts to help free Hausen from the grip of monsters, Aaron decided to adopt him into his family.

As a writer, I was excited to write battles where the two could fight side by side again. I like the fiery passion of men fighting together in battle. And with each volume, Aaron keeps getting stronger. How much stronger will he get?

Fate also faced off against a fateful piece of his past: Rafale Vlerick. I thought a lot about what would happen when the two of them finally met again in Seifort, after Fate became the head of the Barbatos family.

Rafale is an awful, terrible human being, but there's also a reason he ended up that way. I struggled a lot here. What would Fate feel when he found out about Rafale? How would he act? What would he do?

In the end, however, Fate devoured Rafale's soul. In doing so, we got a hint as to what's coming further down the line.

Then we have Memil, Rafale's half-sister, who is going to be an important character for Fate in the future. At the end of Volume Four, Memil is officially adopted into the Barbatos family, making her Fate's sister.

When I first started writing this story, I never could have thought that this would end up happening to Memil. I didn't think of her as much more than a character who would eventually end up dead. But it's surprising to think that it's been two years since we started on the book version of *Berserk of Gluttony*. Sometimes, I really can't believe so much time has passed! I guess it just goes to show that as you keep writing, your plans for characters can and will change.

Memil is a prime example of this. She was originally bound for the same fate as her brother, Rafale. But when I finished Volume Three, I had to rethink things. I wondered if that was really the best way forward. After all, Fate himself had changed. He risked his life to fight the Divine Dragon and was saved by the same young woman he had come to Galia to save. Through these experiences, Fate matured and grew. That was why he wrote his

letter to Roxy, apologizing for all the mistakes he'd made. This Fate is a very different person from the Fate who left Seifort to follow Roxy so long ago.

When Fate faced off against Rafale, Rafale was already under the control of Shin. In order to stop the rampage, Fate had no choice but to kill him. However, how will this new Fate deal with Memil?

That's one thing to look forward to in the next volume!

Another part of the story I agonized over was Myne's departure. Myne is one of my favorite characters, and the idea of sending her somewhere far away…I was very conflicted about it. However, she has goals of her own. And in order to see them through, she has no choice but to leave Fate's side.

I think it hit me the most when I actually wrote the scene where Myne first sheds tears in front of Fate. *Wow, she's really leaving,* I thought. However, this is not where the story of Fate and Myne ends—it's a base from which to grow and build things up again.

Myne is a stubborn one, and she's still a ways from becoming kinder and more understanding. So, as the writer, my job is just to keep the story going so we can get to that time more quickly. I already know the lines for that moment, and I can't wait to write them. I'm also looking forward to reuniting them so I can get back to writing their banter again.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Daisuke Takino, who has adapted *Berserk of Gluttony* into a manga. It's been one year since the manga was first published, and at the time of writing, there are now two volumes available. Takino makes Fate look really cool and Roxy really cute, and I'm always blown away when I get a chance to see the draft images in advance. The fact that Takino can further expand the world of *Berserk of Gluttony* is due to all the support from its readers. Thank you all so much.

The manga so far covers up to the end of the first volume, and it's moving into the second. This means that finally we'll get to see the entrance of Myne and her Wrath. I think things are only going to heat up from there. I'm really looking forward to seeing Myne and her black axe, Sloth, but of course, I'm still expecting big things from Fate and Greed too. Unfortunately, Roxy doesn't play much of a role yet, but that's because of how I constructed the story; she'll be out of the picture until Galia. But I hope, if we're lucky, that we might get to see her pop up in a flashback or memory somewhere.

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor for all the advice, fame for the lively and energetic illustrations, and everyone who helped make this fourth volume possible. The fifth volume will be available soon, and I look forward to writing to you all again then.

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